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A major difference between teaching religious studies and theology in universities in the UK and in the U.S. is that in the UK, students will have had the opportunity to study religion throughout their earlier education. In the UK, schools that are wholly state-funded (which the vast majority of pupils attend) provide nonconfessional religious education. Almost 90 percent of school children are exposed, from the ages of five to sixteen or eighteen, to a religious education that is open and multifaith. National law stipulates that syllabi “should reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain.”² In England, religious education syllabi for schools are organised at a county level by local government, but the majority follow national

guidelines.

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These state that there are to be two sides to religious education in schools: “learning about” and “learning from” the religious traditions. The latter means that pupils are to have the opportunity to explore their own ideas about the kind of ultimate questions with which religions deal.

Religious education in schools in the UK is an academic rather than religious pursuit, with the educational aim of learning about and understanding religions rather than nurturing faith in a particular religion. It is thus a good preparation for the academic study of religion in universities. This is still quite an unusual approach for national education policies to take. The majority of nations in the world either omit religious education altogether from the curricula of state-funded schools (as in the US, Russia, or France), or include religious education of a confessional nature, either in the tradition of the individual family or that perceived to be the shared heritage of the country. Within the national standard, there are differences between the educational systems in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. For the sake of brevity, this article focuses on the English experience.

The religions included in school syllabi are the six most strongly represented in the population: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism and Sikhism. There have been recent

debates about the inclusion of Paganism⁴ (neo-Paganism) as a rapidly growing spiritual identity, as well as Humanism.

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(People with no religious belief make up at least 30 percent of the population, although not many of these are Humanists in the specific sense.) There is scope within many local syllabi for including locally important minorities such as Jains or Bahais. Even though the study of Humanism is rarely specified, the fact that teachers take account of and explore students' own beliefs means that nonreligious life stances are, in practice, included.

Phenomenological Approach

Since the publication of the influential Working Paper 36⁶ thirty years ago, the approach to religious education in state-funded schools has been heavily influenced by a phenomenological approach to the study of religion. A crucial figure in the popularity of this approach in both universities and schools is the late Ninian Smart. Smart saw involvement with what happens in schools as very much the concern of a university professor. As applied to religious education in schools, the phenomenological approach does not imply the philosophy of Husserl or the theory of Eliade, but simply an attempt to look at the full range of religions in as open a way as possible, putting aside prejudice and preconception and attempting to empathise with and understand the believer's point of view. Although in the intervening decades this approach has been both criticised and supplemented, it still lies at the heart of the basic approach to religions in state schools. Teachers, who were delighted that

they were no longer expected to promote religious belief amongst their reluctant pupils and that they could include a range of worldviews in their curricula, warmly welcomed it at its inception.

The main ways in which the phenomenological approach to religious education in schools has been supplemented over the last thirty years can be characterised as existential, experiential, ethnographic and philosophical.

Existential Approach

“Existential” refers to the contention that, for religious education to be effective, it must have a connection with the students’ own interests, concerns, and developmental needs. This approach is currently reflected in the Children and Worldviews Project of Erricker et. al., and in the work of Michael Grimmitt.

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It is reflected in the attainment targets of many religious education syllabi. For example, the syllabus current in my local area, "Awareness, Mystery and Value,"

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requires pupils to learn from religion and human experience, as well as learn about Religion. This means that by the end of their school education, students should have the ability to:

- Reflect on aspects of human nature, identity, personality, and experience, especially in the light of one's own beliefs and experience

- Identify and respond to questions about the nature and purpose of life on earth

- Give an informed and considered response to religious and moral issues

- Identify, name; describe; and give accounts (of religions) in order to build a coherent picture of religious beliefs about the spiritual dimension of life

- Explain similarities and differences between and within religious practices and lifestyles

- Explain the meaning of religious language, story, and symbolism.

This is much more than simply knowing “the facts” about a range of religious traditions — a common misinterpretation by teachers of the aims of the phenomenological approach!

Experiential Approach

“Experiential” refers to two things. First, students gain first hand experience of religious communities by going out and visiting them on their own ground. (Visits to places of worship are a common feature of religious education programmes). Second, an experiential approach encourages insight into the religious experience of others as well as exploration of students’ own spirituality. This is mostly a matter of teaching and learning strategies, such as including space for reflective exercises like meditation and guided fantasy. David Hay and John Hammond are among those who have developed this methodology for schools.¹⁰

Ethnographic Approach

“Ethnographic” refers to the work of Robert Jackson and others who stress the need for students to engage with religion as it is lived in all its diversity and fuzziness.¹¹ Thus, many recent books for schools are based on introducing the student in the class to real children and young people in religious traditions.

Philosophical Approach

“Philosophical” refers to the opportunity for students to discuss the challenging questions that religions raise, as well as the opportunity to explore their own views and to criticise those of the religious heritage presented to them. In this connection, Andrew Wright¹² talks of “religious literacy,” and religious education that is challenging and disturbing rather than an uncritical description of other peoples’ practices.

If carried out effectively, religious education on the above model is an excellent preparation for a degree in religious studies. Since the law requires that local syllabi reflect the fact that Christianity is the majority tradition, it is also good preparation for a degree in Christian theology. At the end of a student’s school career in England, there are national examination options at sixteen (General Certificate of Secondary Education) and eighteen (Advanced Level), organised by examination boards rather than the local government. These include papers

in Christian theology and Biblical studies, as well as major world religions and philosophy of religion. These will only be taken by a minority of pupils (GCSE by about 17 percent; A level by about 3 percent).¹³ A recent success story is the introduction of a short course, equivalent to half a GCSE, which gives credit for a subject that has to be studied anyway, exam or no exam, and which tends to focus on religious, philosophical, and moral issues relevant to students' interests. These papers were taken by 22 percent of school pupils last year, making a total of 39 percent of sixteen-year-olds taking a public examination in religious education.

Because of the inclusion of religious education in the school curriculum, the vast majority of students entering English universities have already studied religions.¹⁴ Thus, university teachers have a responsibility to acknowledge and build upon students' previous learning. The body responsible for inspecting schools, OFSTED, has found that although things have been improving in recent years,

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in practice religious education in schools is nevertheless relatively neglected in terms of time given, resources provided, specialist teachers, (i.e., those with a degree in theology/religious studies), and standards reached. Only a minority of pupils choose to take public examinations in the subject. Although there is great potential in school religious education, in practice, university tutors may find that their students do not arrive with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes

that a reading of school syllabi might lead them to expect.

Turning from schools to university level education, there is in the UK some tension between theology and religious studies. The latter is a relatively new discipline that is still in places struggling against the hegemony of traditional Christian theology. It is religious studies — nonconfessional in nature and, broadly speaking, phenomenological and ethnographic — that is more aligned in both approach and content to the religious education of the local county syllabi. Theology or Biblical studies is appropriate preparation for some of the public examinations or for religious education as it is taught in some Church aided schools and some independent schools. I have also argued¹⁶ that theology, especially if it is widened to include more than Christian theology, (following Ninian Smart's suggestion of "theologies in the plural"¹⁷), reflects the side of religious education in schools where students explore their own beliefs and values, and are provided with opportunities for personal spiritual development. Neither of these tend to be explicitly addressed in purely religious studies degrees.

In the same article, I argue that the three disciplines of religious studies, theology, and religious education have much to learn from each other. University religious studies has established a thoroughly academic (scientific?) approach to the study of

religions and has passed its phenomenological and ethnographic approaches on to school religious education. The specialist study possible in university research can provide schools with up to date subject knowledge and the latest theories. One recent university debate of great use to schools is the deconstruction of the whole notion of world religions. There is a recognition that the term “religion” is itself a mere construct, a useful tool, but not to be taken as reality. At the school level, this helps guard against the tendency to see religions as monolithic, unchanging, and clearly distinguished from each other. University theology can prevent school religious education from being a tourist guide through other people’s beliefs and customs. Instead, it can provide in-depth knowledge of the Christian tradition and challenge students to engage with critical questions of truth while exploring their personal stances on the issues with which religions deal.

Does school religious education have anything to offer university religious studies and theology? Religious education is often ahead of its university equivalent at the level of praxis. In their daily work, school teachers and teacher educators come face to face with students from many or no faiths. They quickly realise that the versions of the traditions practised by students and their families may differ greatly from the textbook versions. The borders between traditions can be very blurred. Teachers are also made acutely aware that in order to attract interest, their subject must have some personal relevance and social engagement. Some of the university debates about the

deconstruction of religions and the need for academic religious studies to be socially engaged have been anticipated in the school classroom.

On a practical level, those with a background in religious education, as well as religious studies and theology, may be able to offer theology and religious studies at the university level the benefit of their experience in the following areas of learning and teaching:

- Designing a curriculum that is attractive to students and relevant to the needs of society

- Utilising a range of teaching strategies, including visual material such as art and artefacts, ICT: engaging all the senses

- Experiencing religious communities directly, through visits and placements: opportunities for experiential and affective as well as cognitive learning

- Using a range of assessment methods rather than just

essays and examinations

- Having a clear idea of the aims and objectives of programs and expected learning outcomes at different levels

- Being clear about the key transferable skills that the subjects can offer.

In England, standards in religious education in schools appear to be improving, and increasing numbers of school students are taking public examinations in the subject. This should be good news for universities in two ways: it is likely to increase the number of students wanting to continue their studies at the

university level, and it maintains a major source of employment for the graduates of those university courses.

The late Professor Ninian Smart had a revolutionary impact on religious studies in universities and in schools in the UK. He also taught both in the UK and the U.S. I leave the final word to him:

“When I started in the university business there was a lot of snobbery, as though dons should not involve themselves with popularization, still less with secondary and primary teaching, or with other branches of higher education. The Shap Working Party [a body set up by Smart et al in 1969 to encourage the inclusion of world religions in education] set its face resolutely against this from the very beginning: all branches of education would be drawn together in a communal enterprise...What is the use of talking about problems in education unless you do something? And of what use is talking about education at all unless you see it as a whole?”¹⁸

Endnotes

¹ Although the general approach to religious education in

schools is very similar in Scotland and Wales, legislation and organization is under separate arrangements too complex to go into here.

² Education Reform Act 1988 (8.3), repeated in Education Act 1996 (376.2)

³ Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (now Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. Model Syllabi for Religious Education

London: SCAA/QCA, 1994. And

Religious Education: Non-statutory Guidance

. London: QCA, 2000. Both are

[available online](#)

⁴ Cush, D. "Paganism in the Classroom," British Journal of Religious Education 19.2 (1996).

⁵ White, J. (1995) "The SCAA Model Syllabi: A Humanist Perspective," World Religions in Education and Rudge, L. (1998) "I am Nothing — Does it Matter?": A Critique of Current Educational Policy and Practice in England on Behalf of the Silent Majority,"

British Journal of Religious Education 20.3

⁶ Schools Council, Religious Education in Secondary Schools. London: Evans, 1971.

⁷ A useful summary of this and other recent research in religious education pedagogy can be found in Grimmitt, M., ed. Pedagogies of Religious Education: Case Studies in the Research and Development of Good Pedagogic Practice in Religious Education

. McCrimmons, 2000.

⁸ Somerset Education. Awareness, Mystery, and Value: Somerset Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education

. Somerset County Council, 1998. There is also a forthcoming article on the philosophy and practical aspects of putting this syllabus together: Cush, D. and Francis, D. “Positive Pluralism’ to Awareness, Mystery, and Value: A Case Study in Religious Education Curriculum Development,” British Journal of Religious Education . 24.1 (2001).

⁹ Somerset (1998), p9.

¹⁰ Hammond, J et. al., New Methods in RE Teaching: An Experiential Approach . (Harlow: Oliver and Boyd, 1998); see also Grimmitt (2000) above.

¹¹ Jackson, R. Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997. And see also Grimmitt (2000) above.

¹² Wright, A. Religious Education in the Secondary School: Prospects for Religious Literacy . London: Fulton, 1993. See also Grimmitt (2000) above.

¹³ Figures refer to the year 1999/2000 and are deduced from statistics published by the [Department for Education and Employment](#) .

¹⁴ There is a parental legal right to withdraw children from the subject, but in practice very few people do.

¹⁵ OFSTED reports can be found at: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/> .

¹⁶ Cush, D. “Big Brother, Little Sister, and the Clerical Uncle: The Relationship between Religious Studies, Religious Education, and Theology?” British Journal of Religious Education 21.3 (1999).

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Smart, Ninian. "The Values of Religious studies," *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 16.2 (1995).

¹⁸ Smart, Ninian. Foreword to Erricker, C. (ed) *Teaching World Religions*.
Oxford: Heinemann, 1993.