

FORUM: Initiating Children into Hermeneutical Discourses in Religious Education: A Response to Rachel Cope and Julian Stern

ROB FREATHY and GILES FREATHY

University of Exeter, UK

In response to previous articles in this journal by Rachel Cope and Julian Stern, and using an example of classroom practice, this article promotes a form of multi-faith religious education in which primary-school pupils (age 5–11) are re-conceived as joint researchers working alongside their teachers, through processes of imaginative and empathetic dialogue, to investigate the effectiveness of different methodologies and methods of studying religion(s). This pedagogical strategy seeks to teach pupils the disciplinary knowledge and skills associated with the communities of academic practice concerned with theological and religious studies, and more specifically to initiate them into the hermeneutical discourses which underlie theological and religious research and teaching. Moreover, it is argued that some of the suggested practices could be applied to the study of spirituality in any context and could contribute to the spiritual development of participants.

KEYWORDS hermeneutics, pedagogy, religious education, research methodology

Introduction

This article responds to the hermeneutical questions raised by Rachel Cope (2013) and Julian Stern (2013) relating to the study of spirituality, and discusses some of the pedagogical matters arising from their methodological reflections. In doing so, it uses an example of multi-faith Religious Education (RE) in a primary school in the south west of England, but some of the practices carried out in this particular

setting could be applied to the study of spirituality and religion in any context.¹ Such practices can also contribute to the spiritual development of participants, for example, by promoting imaginative and empathetic dialogue with the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions of others, and an appreciation of how these assumptions form the hermeneutical lenses through which the world is encountered.

Recapitulating Cope and Stern

In a previous issue of this journal, Cope (2013) describes how her experience of attending a Shaker service led her to re-examine her interpretive approach to the study of the Shaker Revival Period (c.1830–50) in particular, and to the study of religious history and spirituality in general. Specifically, it forced her to consider the extent to which her previous scepticism towards the ecstatic religious experiences and spiritual fervour of the Shakers, as described in her archival sources, had prevented her from being an empathetic and trusting historian. Cope contends that her ‘hermeneutic of doubt’ reduced the beliefs and experiences of the Shakers (as well as the Shakers themselves) to something distant and ‘other’. By resorting only to naturalistic ulterior explanations, such as social, psychological and economic factors, the religious meaning that infused the lives of Shakers, and their understanding of themselves and their worlds, remained hidden from Cope’s ‘methodologically atheist’ interpretive lens. As a consequence, she now promotes a ‘hermeneutic of trust’, calling upon religious historians to suspend their disbelief and immerse themselves in the worldviews of those they are studying, thereby enabling them to better capture the way believers approached, experienced, shared and described spirituality, and in such a way that the subjects would recognize their own stories if they read them. This entails a historiographical shift away from explanation and causation towards an empathetic understanding of the meaning and interiority of human experience.

In response, Stern (2013) argues there are advantages and disadvantages whether researchers are insiders or outsiders, believers or sceptics, doubtful or trustful. Recognizing all research has to have a starting point is the first step towards understanding that no research can attain absolute objectivity or provide a complete account of the subjectivity of others. For this reason, rather than seeking to understand the past on its own terms and immersing oneself into the worldviews of others, on the mistaken assumption that a ‘hermeneutics of trust’ is inherently more powerful methodologically than a ‘hermeneutics of doubt’, Stern argues it would be preferable to understand the past in *dialogue* with the present, and the worldviews of historical subjects in *dialogue* with those of the researcher. In terms of the nature of such dialogue, Stern follows Richard Sennett’s distinction between *dialectic* conversations, which seek to resolve disagreement and achieve a synthesis or common understanding, and *dialogic* conversations, which seek to

¹ In using spirituality and religion, side-by-side, we are not seeking to conflate these terms. We recognize, for example, understandings of spirituality that may be described as religious (e.g. those positing belief in a supernatural reality with which the maintenance of a relationship on the part of humans is conducive to good outcomes) and those that make no recourse to such beliefs, but find meaning and purpose in universal human experience.

make people more aware of their own views and expand their understanding of one another (Sennett 2012: 18–19). For Stern, dialectic conversation is characterized by *sympathy* (i.e. feeling what the other person feels), while dialogic conversation is characterized by *empathy* (i.e. conveying genuine curiosity and a sense of attention to the other). According to him, it is the second which is most often required by those who research and teach about religion and spirituality, particularly religions and spiritualities other than their own, and which is the most intellectually challenging because it requires the ability to listen and imagine. In this regard, he introduces the work of Martin Buber, specifically his view of ‘real’ dialogue (*Realphantasie*) as an act of imagination in which a person can leap beyond the self to understand the reality of another (Buber 2002: 22). For Buber, imagining the real ‘means that I imagine to myself what another man [*sic*] is at this very moment wishing, feeling, perceiving, thinking, and not as a detached content but in his very reality, that is, as a living process in this man’ (Buber 1998: 60). At the same time, it means remaining on one’s own side of the relationship and not wishing to impose oneself on the other (Buber 1998: 74). For Stern, Buber’s description of empathetic dialogue is a model for researchers and teachers of spirituality and religion to follow, a way of ‘making present’ by ‘stepping into the other person’s shoes, as it were, while keeping a sense of one’s own identity’ (Barnett 2009: 211).

Pedagogical matters arising

The articles by Cope and Stern provoke a number of questions that are not only relevant to academic historians and other scholars concerned with the study of religion and spirituality, but also relevant to educational researchers and practitioners, such as the present authors, who share a particular interest in the teaching of RE in English schools.² More specifically, we endorse a form of multi-faith RE which teaches pupils about world religions, but does not seek to promote religious beliefs, practices and allegiances, while encouraging pupils to reflect upon religious and spiritual matters from their own points of view (Freathy 2008). In this context, where children are often drawn from diverse religious and non-religious backgrounds, many pupils, like Cope, experience ‘skepticism and doubt’, feel simultaneously ‘intrigued and dubious’, and regard the phenomena under study as ‘utterly preposterous’, evidence of ‘craziness’ or outside their ‘personal comfort zone[s]’. Unlike her, they are not involved in a voluntary or direct dialogue with their subject matter, but one which is a statutory requirement for all pupils (unless withdrawn by their parents) and mediated by teachers, pedagogies and curriculum materials. In her conclusion, Cope writes of ‘the need to define [...] one’s hermeneutical approach’, but the hermeneutical lenses of pupils are, at least to some extent, chosen for them often without them realizing. This might be deemed unavoidable in any classroom representation of religion(s), but such a

² Every English state-maintained school must provide RE for all pupils, except for those withdrawn by their parents (or withdrawing themselves if they are aged 18 or over) in accordance with Schedule 19 of the School Standards and Framework Act (1998). RE in fully state-maintained schools must reflect that the religious traditions of Great Britain are in the main Christian, while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain (Education Act 1996 c. 56, Part V, Chapter III, Agreed syllabuses, Section 375).

realization heightens the significance of the methodological issues discussed by Cope and Stern, and the pedagogical questions to which they give rise. Such questions have been debated within RE research and professional practice for many decades and there is not space here to rehearse all of the suggested answers. Instead, we seek to set out our ongoing attempt to answer such questions by devising, both in theory and practice, a new pedagogical strategy for RE in primary schools (i.e. 5–11 year olds) that promotes pupil engagement with multiple methodological perspectives, thereby enriching their visions of the curriculum subject and the subject matter within it. In this curriculum development project, which is at an early stage prior to any formal empirical evaluation, we are already helping to prepare dialogic, empathetic and imaginative researchers of religion and spirituality for the future.

A pedagogical strategy for RE

Theory

We believe the main purpose of RE should be to teach pupils the disciplinary knowledge and skills associated with the communities of academic practice concerned with theological and religious studies.³ In other words, to enable pupils to enter into the kind of informed, critical and sensitive dialogues which are at the heart of academic study of religion(s).⁴ This does not mean acquiring more and more knowledge about religions, but instead learning how to participate in the sort of academic enquiry which gives rise to such knowledge and the intellectual discourses which seek to understand and critique it. Here we agree with a growing number of academic religious educationists (Baumfield 2005, 2011; Chater 2011; Cush and Robinson 2013; and Vermeer 2012), but we go further in arguing that both teachers *and* pupils need to engage in fruitful dialogue not only about what is taught in RE and why (i.e. contents and aims), but also how (i.e. methods).

The above intentions give rise to a number of questions, for example, what disciplinary knowledge and skills are associated with the communities of academic practice concerned with theological and religious studies, and which dialogues and forms of enquiry are at the heart of the academic study of religion(s)? An array of theories, definitions and dimensions of religion has been postulated over the years. Consequently, theological and religious studies have become multi-disciplinary fields of study, utilizing philosophical, historical, archaeological, linguistic, literary, psychological, sociological, cultural and anthropological perspectives, as

³ All pupils, regardless of their personal beliefs, should be expected to engage in theological studies, that is, the study of God (or the concept of God) and the sub-disciplinary fields associated with it (e.g. hermeneutics, history, philosophy and ethics). The study of theistic religions, under whatever disciplinary banner, necessitates engagement with theological discourse. Theology should involve consideration of 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives and be open to theistic, atheistic and agnostic scholars.

⁴ The Non-statutory National Framework for RE and numerous local Agreed Syllabuses in England refer to learning about and learning from 'religion' (QCA 2004: 11), but it is a moot point whether 'religion' — in the singular — is an appropriate or even identifiable object of study. Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1962), for example, describes it as a recent, Western and unstable intellectual construct, and argues that 'religiousness' rather than 'religion' should be the object of study. (For further discussion, and some contrasting views, see the writings of Ninian Smart, Eric Sharpe, John Hick and Keith Ward.)

well as the insights of innumerable philosophical and theoretical frameworks which cut across the disciplines, for example feminism, post-colonialism and post-structuralism. This multi-perspectival complexity is mirrored by a surfeit of suggested strategies for teaching RE as evidenced, for example, by the phenomenological, experiential, interpretive, theological, critical realist, narrative and constructivist approaches described in Michael Grimmitt's *Pedagogies of Religious Education* (2000).

Some religious educators regard the pedagogies outlined in Grimmitt (2000) to be in competition with one another as they are based on irreconcilably different assumptions about the nature of religions, what we can know about them and how we should study them, and that it would therefore be inappropriate for teachers to adopt more than one. By contrast, other religious educators maintain that these pedagogies can be used simultaneously or successively in a complementary fashion by differentiating the methods from the methodologies and applying whichever approach is most appropriate given the aims and content of any particular lesson or unit of work. Lat Blaylock (2012: 4–5), for example, has playfully applied seven of these approaches to the teaching of Easter in a 'pedagogical fantasy' (see Stern 2006: 74–79). For him, the practice, and even the lives, of teachers are enriched by learning from other schools of thought and implementing their associated approaches in their classrooms (Blaylock 2004: 15).

Dan Moulin (2009: 153) contends that 'by favouring certain epistemological and methodological approaches, current pedagogies are at risk of infringing the liberal principle, and human right, of freedom of belief'. For him, a pedagogy based upon one mode of interpretation will preclude pupils accessing knowledge of different points of view, and the epistemological and methodological assumptions of the pedagogies may be incompatible with some pupils' sincerely held and reasonable worldviews (Moulin 2009: 154). In response, he promotes a 'liberal' pedagogy of RE in which liberalism is understood as a civil means of accommodating incompatible truth-claims and values rather than as an ideological end in itself (Moulin 2009: 156 and 163). Underpinning this is John Rawls' concept of a social contract based on an overlapping consensus on the conception of justice in the absence of public agreement on the conception of the good (Rawls 1971, 1993 and 2001). Thereby, Moulin hopes to construct a fair pedagogy 'that does not rely on any religious (i.e. confessionalism) or philosophical (i.e. postmodernism) foundation' (2009: 158) and which is 'non-confessional and bias-free' (Moulin 2009: 164). His resultant pedagogical principles include the following: (i) a 'whole range of methods of enquiry into religion should be used'; (ii) where 'a spectrum of opinions is available, students should be exposed to as many as possible whenever possible'; and (iii) where 'there are opposing views, differing opinions are to be represented by their most cogent arguments' (Moulin 2009: 160).

In many ways, as Moulin acknowledges (2009: 157), these principles answer Jacqueline Watson's appeal for an inclusive 'critical democratic' approach to education for spiritual development in schools. She argues,

the word 'spirituality', in these post or late modern times, will *inevitably* be defined, or described, in a contextualized form. In other words, any individual's account of

spirituality brings into play a belief system through which that individual's understanding and use of the word 'spirituality' is given its meaning. This means there will be many accounts of spirituality (Watson 2006: 114–5).

Accordingly, she advocates an approach to spiritual education which would include a critical examination, and knowledge and understanding of, a diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews, and 'opportunities for dialogue — a hermeneutical approach — taking the form of a Rortian conversation united "by civility rather than by a common goal, much less by a common ground" [Rorty 1998: 318]' (Watson 2006: 121).

Following in this tradition, and synthesizing the pedagogical principles, but not all of the ontological and epistemological assumptions, of the critical realist and dialogic theories of Andrew Wright (2007) and Rupert Wegerif (2012) respectively, our approach begins with the assumption that it is not the responsibility of RE teachers to promote any particular theory or definition of religion or a specific mode of interpretation, but to facilitate discussion and evaluation of a plurality of perspectives through practical, participative and interactive methods of dialogic enquiry. Debates about the methodologies and methods of theological and religious studies, and the plethora of pedagogies of RE to which they give rise, should not be excluded from the classroom. They should be explicit matters for discussion within it, so as to enable pupils to make up their own minds and take responsible action regarding curriculum resources and pedagogical practices which have been pre-determined by theorists, curriculum designers and teachers. There is no neutral vantage point from which religions can be explored without prejudice. Any ideological bias needs to be brought to the surface and openly acknowledged. Both teachers and pupils need to learn the skills, knowledge and wisdom so as to enable them to recognize and admit to their underlying presuppositions and to identify them in others.

In our approach, an emphasis is placed upon pupil engagement with the diversity of dialogues that form the heterogeneous multi-disciplinary fields of theological and religious studies. This means not only learning about religion(s), which represents the principal aim of most contemporary RE classroom practice in England, but also learning how to learn about religion(s). For this purpose, at a conceptual level appropriate for their age, pupils need to gain sufficient disciplinary knowledge and competence to facilitate informed, critical, sensitive and ideologically-aware conversation about ontological, epistemological and methodological matters, and specifically about the nature of religion(s), the methodologies and methods by which religious knowledge and knowledge about religion(s) is produced, and the skills and dispositions associated with theological and religious scholars. Thereby, pupils can be drawn into dialogue about methodological and pedagogical matters, and initiated into the academic practices of those concerned with theological and religious research and teaching. Furthermore, we advocate that the spotlight of scrutiny should be turned as often as possible upon the pedagogical principles underpinning our own approach. While we acknowledge the impossibility of developing a pedagogy without any ontological, epistemological and/or methodological foundations, we can seek to

make our assumptions transparent, so that they too can be subjected to critical analysis and evaluation.

Therefore, in terms of a pedagogical response to the methodological questions raised by Cope and Stern, we advocate engaging pupils in empathetic dialogic conversations with real or imagined representatives of as wide a range of hermeneutical frameworks as possible, and in such a way as to enable pupils to remain on their own side of the relationship and keep a sense of their own identity.

Practice

While a number of high-profile research projects in the recent past have been influential with regard to the development of RE theory, there is little evidence to suggest that these projects have successfully bridged the gap between the intended and operational curriculum, for example, by influencing the development of syllabuses of RE (Blaylock 2004: 13). To address this theory–practice divide, in one primary school, in the south west of England, we trialled a simple technique to draw children into active shared inquiry in the field of theological and religious studies and in a manner consistent with our theoretical framework above. It was partially inspired by Edward de Bono's *Six Thinking Hats* (1985), but also by continuing professional development resources produced by Blaylock (2004: 13–15) in which he provides light-hearted overviews of six major pedagogical schools of thought labelled as follows:

1. Unreconstructed Phenomenologists
2. Interpretives (Jacksonians)
3. Spiritual Experientialists
4. Humanisers
5. Concept Crackers (Coolingites)
6. Postmodern relativist deconstructers and reconstructers

In an approach similar to Blaylock's, but in the context of teaching pupils not teachers, we developed four cartoon character 'superheroes' each with very different research strengths and interests, but all committed to theological and religious studies. Together they were known as the 'RE-searchers', but individually they were called:

- Know-it-all Nicky: an observer and recorder of data influenced by phenomenological approaches to the study of religion(s);
- Debate-it-all Derek: a Critical Realist philosopher with a penchant for discussing doctrinal/theological matters;
- Ask-it-all Ava: an ethnographic interviewer dedicated to empathetic interpretive methods of enquiry; and
- Have-a-go Hugo: an advocate of experiential learning and sensory and emotional immersion into the lives of his research participants.

Illustrations of, and character profiles for, each of the 'RE-searchers' are provided in Freathy and Freathy (2013: 5–6). As was the case with the summaries provided by Blaylock, they are caricatures of some of the pedagogical approaches outlined in Grimmitt (2000). Indeed, they are personifications of those viewpoints and

voices, designed to draw pupils into empathetic dialogue about what it would mean to look at and talk about religion(s) in different ways.

Furthermore, in our approach, pupils are re-conceived as joint researchers working alongside teachers to investigate the effectiveness of different methodologies and methods of studying religion(s), and thereby acquiring the knowledge and skills associated with the communities of academic practice concerned with theological and religious studies. To do so, they utilize the 'RE-searcher' characters, for example, in role-play activities in which teacher-facilitators encourage pupils to exercise empathetic imagination, to step in and out of character, and engage in dialogic conversation about (i) the religious phenomenon under study, (ii) the 'RE-searcher' character through whose eyes it has been viewed (including their implicit ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions), and (iii) the pupils' skills, dispositions and worldviews as researchers.

In this regard, our approach can be seen to build upon the work of Stern who promotes 'a pedagogy that is itself a form of research' (Stern 2010: 142) and through which pupil learning is re-conceptualized as 'RE-search' (i.e. an original and systematic search for truth) (Stern 2006: 4–5). For Stern, teachers who 'see themselves as researchers, and their pupils as co-researchers [can] build learning communities and religious understanding in contemporary plural classrooms' (Stern 2010: 133–34), and develop 'a greater understanding of teaching and learning' by focusing upon their own pedagogical/methodological assumptions (Stern 2010: 134). Unlike Stern, however, we believe that the utilization of this 'apprenticeship' model of collaborative learning (Lave and Wenger 1991), in the discrete curriculum subject of RE, should be conceived as an initiation into the communities of academic practice concerned with theological and religious studies, and that this disciplinary orientation is essential if suitable parameters are to be set around the subject's aims, content and methods (Baumfield 2005: 3–4). Even so, like Stern (2010: 143–44), we acknowledge that additional justifications might be necessary to legitimize the statutory position of RE in the curriculum (e.g. its contribution to human development).

A curriculum trial

For the purposes of informally evaluating our approach, which is still very much a work-in-progress, we undertook a curriculum trial utilizing the 'RE-searcher' characters in a variety of different learning activities. This was undertaken throughout the school at both Key Stages (KS1: 5–7 year olds and KS2: 7–11 year olds) with differing amounts of information being given at each stage and in age-appropriate language. On 'Ask-it-all Ava Day', for example, four groups of KS2 pupils interviewed four Christians from four different denominations in turn. The same questions were asked to each interviewee to identify commonalities and disagreements between them. Afterwards the pupils were invited to discuss the effectiveness of the approach and what they had learned about the diversity of beliefs and practices within Christianity. Finally, the pupils completed a self-assessment task. Here are a couple of the responses we received from Year 5 pupils:

- 'I think that the interview was a good way of learning because we don't normally make interviews of people. Making changes instead of doing the same old, same old, it makes me like learning when it is different and it's actually learning two things – how to be Ask-it-all Ava and about the [interviewees].'
- 'The interviews helped me understand other people's beliefs and what they believe is Christian and what they need to do to be a Christian in their eyes. I like the lesson because I liked to learn about their beliefs. I also liked the lesson because it was different and I will remember it more easily.' (Freathy and Freathy 2013: 4)

On another occasion, as a follow-up activity to an RE lesson which had purposefully involved multiple teaching methods and diverse learning activities, we asked Year 5 and 6 pupils (9–11 year olds) to compose a letter as if written by 'Know-it-all Nicky' to be sent to 'Have-a-go Hugo', and then to write a letter from Hugo in reply. Bearing in mind the methodological preferences of each character, the pupils were asked to describe and justify in each letter which aspects of the preceding RE lesson they had most appreciated. The purpose of the task was to develop the pupils' ability to empathize with, and articulate, contrasting methodological perspectives. In subsequent lessons, the pupils were also given opportunities to evaluate the effectiveness of each RE-searcher's approach, for example, through the investigation of different aspects of one religion or similar aspects of a number of religions from each RE-searcher's perspective.

At the end of the unit of work, in an effort to enable pupils to retain, reflect upon and articulate a sense of their own identity rather than losing themselves in continuous empathetic dialogic conversation, we invited pupils to consider whether any of the RE-searchers' approaches cohere with their own worldviews, methodological preferences and special interests, and to develop their own cartoon characters representative of their personal approaches. Thereby, pupils were given an opportunity to manifest achievement of the widely used second attainment target for RE — Learning from religion — which is concerned with developing pupils' (i) 'reflection on and response to their own and others' experiences in the light of their learning about religion', (ii) 'skills of application, interpretation and evaluation of what they learn about religion', and (iii) ability 'to develop and communicate their own ideas, particularly in relation to questions of identity and belonging, meaning, purpose and truth, and values and commitments' (QCA 2004: 11).

To evaluate the approach in general, specifically in terms of pupil attitudes, we undertook semi-structured interviews with three focus groups, each containing three pupil volunteers, and each representing a different year group (Years 3–5). Here is a selection of responses from our Year 4 participants:

- 'I like using them because when you are using the super heroes it makes you think more and learn more. It is challenging and better than doing easier stuff.'
- 'I like it because we can learn to be like them and learn from them. It puts me in another world! It puts me in their shoes.'

- ‘I like it because it helps me understand how people find their way through life: asking questions or finding out information and applying it to their lives and to their knowledge of life. And it helps me know how I can get my way through my life.’ (Freathy and Freathy 2013: 5)

Overall, the evidence collected through our preliminary curriculum trial suggests our pedagogical strategy has real potential to improve pupils’ learning and motivation to learn in RE. By discussing the methodological preferences of the ‘RE-searchers’ and thinking about, or acting out, what it would mean to view religious phenomena from a plurality of perspectives, we were able to introduce pupils to complex theological and philosophical issues concerning the nature of religion(s), and religious knowledge, and to provide them with opportunities to assess the strengths and weaknesses of differing methodologies and methods. Thereby, our approach has shown its potential to provide rudimentary research training, including an embryonic awareness of the hermeneutical issues raised by Cope and Stern, to the next generation of scholars of religion and spirituality.

Buoyed by this success, we have also used the ‘RE-searcher’ characters productively as part of the RE provision in a one-year primary-school teacher training course. In advance of visits to a synagogue, church and mosque, organized for the purpose of enhancing the religious subject-knowledge of non-specialists, the trainees were introduced to the ‘RE-searchers’ (as well as the relevant underpinning theories) and asked to select one character into whose shoes they would step for the purpose of the visits. Next, in further preparation, they were asked to develop their subject knowledge of Jewish, Christian and Islamic beliefs and practices in a manner in-keeping with their chosen character, for example, through a judicious selection of appropriate literature or types of fieldwork. On the visits themselves, they were asked to evaluate the educational experience offered by the faith communities through the eyes of their characters, and to analyse the quality and effectiveness of their fellow trainees’ role playing, for example, in terms of the religious insights gleaned from the different types of question they asked. Overall, through undertaking the faith visits in the role of different ‘RE-searcher’ characters, the trainees were provided with an opportunity to learn about the Abrahamic faiths; study in-depth one particular methodology/pedagogy; discuss its usefulness as an interpretive lens; reflect upon themselves as learners/teachers; evaluate the effectiveness of our approach; and consider whether it is one they would like to implement themselves.

Conclusion

If Cope had applied the methodological implications of our pedagogical approach to her study of the Shaker Revival Period, she might not have made a categorical choice between adopting a ‘hermeneutic of doubt’ or a ‘hermeneutic of trust’, but oscillated playfully between them, as well as between other hermeneutical frameworks, in an imaginative exploration of their respective potentialities. This would not simply be understanding the past in dialogue with the present, and the worldviews of historical subjects in dialogue with those of the researcher, but actively seeking to change the nature of the dialogue to see how different

interpretive lenses act as windows to the worlds of others and mirrors to the world of the researcher. Furthermore, if this is recognized as a meaningful and valuable goal, then all scholars of religion(s), of whatever age, should be prepared to participate in empathetic dialogic conversations about the methodological and pedagogical issues which underlie theological and religious research and teaching respectively. In accordance with our approach, this means learning to look both *through* and *at* a multiplicity of hermeneutical lenses, whether these are characterized by doubt and scepticism or trust and belief. By getting primary-school pupils and teacher trainees to discuss religious subject content in relation to the 'RE-searchers' described above, we believe we have found a practical and successful way of initiating learners and teachers into hermeneutical discourses, and equipping them with the disciplinary knowledge and skills necessary to step in and out of the shoes of insiders and outsiders. Of course this is still a work-in-progress and there are lots of potential avenues for further theoretical and practical work (e.g. creating a wider range of 'RE-searcher' characters, and considering progression and assessment issues), but we have made our first tentative steps, reassured by Cope and Stern that the issues are significant and our ambition is worthwhile.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Karen Walshe, Geoff Teece, Jonathan Doney and David Hampshire for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

References

- Barnett, L. 2009. 'Dialogues: Buber, Rogers, Lévinas and the Therapeutic Relationship'. In *When Death Enters the Therapeutic Space: Existential Perspectives in Psychotherapy and Counselling*, L. Barnett (ed.), 209–217. London: Routledge.
- Baumfield, V. 2005. 'Editorial: Disciplinary Knowledge and Religious Education'. *British Journal of Religious Education* 27, no. 1: 3–4.
- Baumfield, V. 2011. 'Making RE Work: A Thoughtful Future for the Subject'. Paper presented at Burn Hall, May 2011.
- Blaylock, L. 2004. 'Six Schools of Thought in RE'. *REsource* 27, no. 1: 13–16.
- Blaylock, L. 2012. 'Good Learning in RE: Guidance for Teachers'. Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Luton RE Support. http://beds-re-resources.org.uk/beds_schools/A2_Good_learning_pedagogy_and_method_for_the_teacher_of_RE.pdf.
- Buber, M. 1998. *The Knowledge of Man: Selected Essays*. New York: Humanity Books.
- Buber, M. 2002. *Between Man and Man*. London: Routledge.
- Chater, M. 2011. 'What's Worth Fighting for in RE?' Paper presented at Conway Hall, March 2011, <http://www.reonline.org.uk/supporting/re-matters/news-inner/?id=3927>.
- Cope, R. 2013. 'Hermeneutics of Trust *vs.* Hermeneutics of Doubt: Considering Shaker Spirituality'. *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 3, no. 1: 56–66.
- Cush, D. and C. Robinson. 2013. 'Developments in Religious Studies: Towards a dialogue with Religious Education'. *British Journal of Religious Education* DOI: 10.1080/01416200.2013.830960.
- de Bono, E. 1985. *Six Thinking Hats*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Fancourt, N. 2010. "'I'm Less Intolerant": Reflexive Self-assessment in Religious Education'. *British Journal of Religious Education* 32, no. 3: 291–305.

- Freathy, R. 2008. 'Religious Education'. In *The Routledge International Encyclopedia of Education*, G. McCulloch and D. Crook (eds.), 490–91. London: Routledge.
- Freathy, R. and G. Freathy. 2013. 'RE-searchers: A Dialogic Approach to RE in Primary Schools'. *REsource* 36, no. 1: 4–7.
- Grimmitt, M. (ed.) 2000. *Pedagogies of Religious Education: Case Studies in the Research and Development of Good Pedagogic Practice in RE*. Great Wakering: McCrimmon.
- Lave, J. and E. Wenger. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moulin, D. 2009. 'A Too Liberal Religious Education? A Thought Experiment for Teachers and Theorists'. *British Journal of Religious Education* 31, no. 2: 153–65.
- QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority). 2004. *Religious Education: The Non-statutory National Framework*. London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.
- Rawls, J. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rawls, J. 1993. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rawls, J. 2001. *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Rorty, R. 1998. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sennett, R. 2012. *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*. London: Allen Lane.
- Smith, W. C. 1962. *The Meaning and End of Religion*. New York: Mentor Books.
- Stern, J. 2006. *Teaching Religious Education: Researchers in the Classroom*. London: Continuum.
- Stern, J. 2010. 'Research as Pedagogy: Building Learning Communities and Religious Understanding in RE'. *British Journal of Religious Education* 32, no. 2: 133–46.
- Stern, J. 2013. 'Martin Buber, Empathy and Research Practice: A Response to Rachel Cope'. *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 3, no. 1: 67–72.
- Vermeer, P. 2012. 'Meta-concepts, Thinking Skills and Religious Education'. *British Journal of Religious Education* 34, no. 3: 333–47.
- Watson, J. 2006. 'Spiritual Development and Inclusivity: The Need for a Critical Democratic Approach'. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 11, no. 1: 113–24.
- Wegerif, R. B. 2012. *Dialogic: Education for the Internet Age*. London: Routledge.
- Wright, A. 2007. *Critical Religious Education, Multiculturalism and the Pursuit of Truth*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Notes on contributors

Rob Freathy is a Senior Lecturer at the Graduate School of Education, University of Exeter, UK.

Giles Freathy is a Specialist Leader in Education at Sir Robert Geffery's Primary School, Cornwall, UK.

Correspondence to: Dr R. J. K. Freathy, Graduate School of Education, University of Exeter, St Luke's Campus, Heavitree Road, Exeter, EX1 2LU. Email: r.j.k.freathy@exeter.ac.uk