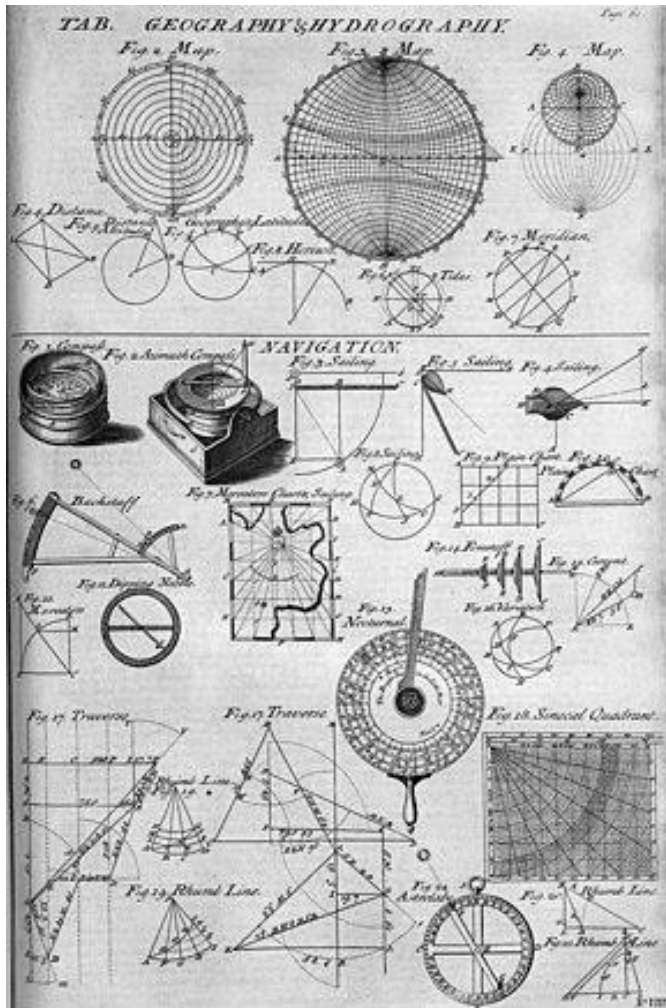


RELIGIOUS LITERACY: A WAY FORWARD FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION?



If you cannot read, you cannot be an obedient citizen.

Neil Postman

Learn the ABC. It's not enough but learn it.

Bertolt Brecht

Gert Biesta, David Aldridge, Patricia Hannam and
Sean Whittle

Brunel University London & Hampshire Inspection and Advisory Service
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**RELIGIOUS LITERACY:
A WAY FORWARD FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION?
A Report Submitted to the Culham St Gabriel's Trust
Gert Biesta, David Aldridge, Patricia Hannam & Sean Whittle
June 2019**

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Cyclopaedia, Volume 1.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of ‘religious literacy’ continues to capture the attention of practitioners, scholars and policy makers in the field of religious education, both as an aim for religious education and as an organising principle for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. ‘Being literate’ suggests that one is knowledgeable about religions and able to navigate the complexities of religious domains, which seems to be a worthwhile ambition for religious education. It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that the notion of religious literacy figures regularly in recent discussions about religious education (see for example the All Party Parliamentary Group on religious education 2013; Clarke & Woodhead 2015, Dinham & Shaw 2015; the Report of the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life 2015; Arweck & Jackson 2012; Conroy, Lundie, Davis, Baumfield, Barnes, Gallagher, Lowden, Bourque & Wenell 2013; Baumfield, Cush, & Miller, 2014). Yet despite the ongoing interest, religious literacy has not become the notion around which discussions about the present and future of religious education have come together. This may have to do with a lack of clarity about what the idea of religious literacy entails, but also with continuing questions about what it would mean to make religious literacy the ongoing principle for classroom practice.

The main ambition of this report is to provide further clarity about the idea of religious literacy, both as an aim for religious education and as an organising principle for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. For this we have reviewed literature on literacy, literacy education, religious literacy, and religious education, mainly focusing on discussions in the UK context and literature from the English-speaking world. Given the small scale of the project upon which this report is based, we have not conducted a comprehensive review of all available literature but have rather tried to identify and summarise main ideas and discussions. We have discussed a draft of our report with scholars from the field of religious education and literacy education from the UK and other countries.¹ We have also discussed a draft of our report with teachers and teacher educators working in religious education in England.² Both meetings were every helpful in sharpening up the lines of thought in this report. However, they also indicated the need for further work, both regarding the theoretical dimensions of literacy, literacy education and religious literacy, as well as with regard to the practice of religious education and the role religious literacy may or may not be able to play in it. Our intention with this report, therefore, is not to draw any final conclusions about the usefulness of religious literacy for religious education, but rather to inform further discussions about its potential value.

¹ The following people provided input and feedback at our meeting: Kevin O’Grady, Bert Roebben, David Lundie, Elizabeth Arweck, Janet Orchard, Kris Rutten, Martha Shaw, Ole Kjørven, and Richard Kueh.

² The following people provided input and feedback at our meeting: Kevin O’Grady, Alicia Starbicki, Beth Feltham, David Scard, James Omand, Kate Vernon, Laura Ord, Maureen Barnes and Nicola Pandolfo.

The report is structured in the following way.

In section 2 the meanings of literacy are considered. This involves recognising that beyond the historical and sociological dimensions of literacy, it is imperative to grasp that it is a deeply political concept. It is argued that it is important to highlight the educational assumptions underlying the idea of literacy itself. The metaphor of literacy as navigation is explored to highlight that being literate means not only that one is able find one's way around in a particular domain or terrain, but also that one can be critical of how the domains are being defined, and by whom. Finally, we present a way of evaluating discussions of literacy in educational contexts.

Section 3 presents a historical review of religious education in the UK in order to map out the contemporary context. This will help to demonstrate the stances we are adopting to religious literacy in this report, and reveal a contrast as compared to those typically used.

Section 4 shifts attention to the emergence and development of the term 'religious literacy.' The stances of Wright, Prothero, Moore and Dinham are considered, and we draw attention to the broader context of religion and the growing socio-political calls for religious literacy. The discourse about religious literacy covers more than questions about the aims and contents of religious education in schools. We then engage in a critical discussion of the term religious literacy that draws explicitly on the exploration of literacy undertaken in section 2.

In section 5 we draw some conclusions and provide some preliminary points to consider when answering the question as to whether religious literacy can and/or should be a 'way forward' for religious education.

2. THE MEANINGS OF LITERACY

In recent decades ‘literacy’ has become a central concept in educational discourse, influencing both policy initiatives and daily practices in education. Literacy is a *complex* concept which overlaps with a cluster of others, including ‘literature,’ illiteracy, non-literary, non-literate. ‘Literacy’ is also a *ubiquitous* concept. It is something which cannot be easily pigeonholed into a couple of distinct domains (relating to education). Alongside education, sociology and political discourse have much to contribute to the distilling of dominant accounts of the meaning of literacy and literacies. In this section we provide an overview of key ideas and strands in the discussion about literacy, also in relation to education.

2.1 Historical observations

The concept of ‘literacy’ first appears in the middle of the 18th Century. Prior to that the concept of ‘literature’ was used more generally as a characteristic that some people had. Being a ‘person acquainted with literature’ was an apt way of describing someone who is well read in the canon of literature. A ‘person of letters’ or one of the ‘*literati*’ are other ways of describing someone who has knowledge, understanding and appreciation of classical works of literature. These sorts of descriptions bring attention to a positive but not entirely common characteristic, that of being well read. This provides a helpful reminder that for most of human experience and history people have engaged exclusively in oral literacy. Being able to engage in written literacy is, historically speaking, a much more recent phenomenon. In the not so distant past, it was ‘normal’ to be illiterate and not regarded as problem. However, over the past two centuries ‘illiteracy’ has come to be regarded as a deficiency.

It is intriguing to speculate about what has brought this shift from illiteracy being typical to it now being viewed as problem. One answer might be the (probable) relationship between literacy and economics. If economic goals are better achieved through having a largely literate population, then illiteracy is an issue or problem that must be tackled in order to serve the economic aims of society. Another answer, hinted at by Collins and Blot (2003), is that the emergence of compulsory schooling has fed a growing anxiety over illiteracy. There may well be a possible conflation between ‘schooling’ and ‘literacy.’ In common usage being illiterate is now synonymous with having little or insufficient schooling. It is intriguing to note that by age of ten the vast majority of children in countries like the UK have achieved functional literacy. Due to the need to generate ‘certification’ and qualifications and of course child care, compulsory school extends well beyond the age of ten. Perhaps then illiteracy is only a problem against the context of compulsory schooling.

2.2 The politics of literacy

It is important to recognise that ‘literacy’ is a deeply political concept. There are a number of strands to this, one being the stance that ‘literacy is a human right.’ To be lacking literacy skills is to experience a serious deprivation that hinders human flourishing. Another strand is the relationship between schooling and literacy. One of the (political) functions of schooling is to initiate children into the use of written language, in particular the ability to give them the skills to read, decode, interpret a range of texts (in the preferred language of the polity). There are a range of political goals for wanting to do this, for example economic ones. Having significant sections of society that are functionally literate has an economic benefit. The literacy projects of the OECD and UNESCO are routinely justified in terms of the economic benefits of fostering literacy. A further political strand would be the ways in which being schooled in literacy contributes to socialisation, identity and senses of belonging to the wider society (and nation-state).

In learning how to read and write a given language, such as English, one of the functions is to foster and promote a connection with the wider socio-political context. Children come to school proficient in differing literacies, but this is typically ignored or down played in order to encourage pupils to adopt the dominant written literacy that the school is seeking foster. It is about being schooled into a particular literacy. Within the domain of the school, children are inducted into a fairly specific literacy. The decisions about which written language and which texts are not primarily treated as educational issues, but rather they are political ones. The questions about what text and literacy content pupils ‘ought’ to be schooled in raise issues of power and control (and these are of course political issues).

2.3 The sociology of literacy

An initial survey of the sociology of literacy raises awareness of some significant changes over the past century. Pioneering works in the sociology of education tended to regard ‘literacy’ as an autonomous set of skills. Literacy was regarded as the name of a process, the event of becoming literate – which involves acquiring functional literacy. It was something that could be seen as having tangible positive consequences for society as a whole. Goody and Watt’s work (1963) on ‘The Consequences of literacy’ presented a fundamental anthropological shift from ‘talking humans’ to ‘writing humans.’ This seminal work sought not so much to make a sharp distinction between ‘uncivilised’ primitive illiterate peoples and civilised literate ones, rather instead it offers a description of how becoming literate has a profound effect on society. This wider social consequence reflects the positive consequences literacy has for both society in general and for individuals. However, in recent decades the sociology of education has witnessed a significant reassessment of this way of understanding literacy.

The rise of the ‘New Literacy Studies’ (see for example Brandt and Clinton 2002; Gee 2000; Street 1993) two decades ago brought into focus differing ways characterising literacy. Instead of depicting it as an ‘event’ built on an autonomous set of skills, literacy

is better regarded as something more akin to a social practice. It is not autonomous activity, but rather to be literate is to be engaged in a deeply communal set of social practices. Moreover, pupils coming to school ought to be recognised as not being blank slates when it comes to literacy. They bring with them a literacy, and sometimes more than one. Typically, this is an oral literacy but can include other literacies. The New Literacy Studies began to characterise literacy in terms of ‘multi-literacies.’ This approach to literacy is more fluid in what is counted as a ‘text’ and the ambiguities of who decides. This shift in stance amongst sociologists of education has allowed for the proliferation of different types, including: digital literacy, financial literacy, emotional literacy, physical health literacy (and of course religious literacy).

2.4 Cultural literacy and core knowledge

Contemporary advocates of a ‘knowledge-rich’ curriculum sometimes draw on the work of E D Hirsch’s ‘Core Knowledge Foundation,’ which in turn depends on Hirsch’s advocacy of Cultural Literacy (Hirsch 1987; see also Gibb 2015). Richard Kueh summarises Hirsch’s contribution as the recognition that ‘learners require essential pieces of knowledge that literate communicators assume their addressees to possess’ (2017: 61). The pertinent educational project – exemplified in Hirsch’s (1987) initial identification of the five thousand core concepts that the literate American needs to know – is to enumerate and describe the specific items of knowledge required for the requisite understanding at a particular point in a given curriculum area.

Hirsch grounds his advocacy of core knowledge in research conducted with undergraduate students at the University of Virginia. Crucial to the argument is Hirsch’s identification of two separate components of ‘reading skill,’ a procedural ability to read and decode, and the substantive content knowledge that writers assume their readers have (the ‘schema’). Hirsch and his colleagues designed assessments whereby they determined that students who were able to comprehend texts with similarly challenging vocabulary and complexity nevertheless displayed different levels of comprehension. Hirsch’s explanation for this was that the students drew on different degrees of relevant background knowledge (for example, when one text discussed ‘Grant and Lee’ and therefore assumed background contextual knowledge about the American Civil War). Understanding these texts required both procedural reading ability and knowledge of the concepts concerned (‘cultural literacy’).

Hirsch’s elaboration of the components of cultural literacy included religious terms and other concepts, events, objects and entities of a philosophical, theological and sociological nature. For Hirsch, there is no specialised phenomenon of religious literacy, rather the general phenomenon of cultural literacy includes religious content and thus the inclusion of some of this content on the school curriculum is justified. It is within this broader concept of cultural literacy, developed across several curriculum areas, that Prothero situates his argument for religious literacy; the title of his (2008) book on the subject ‘Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and doesn’t,’ echoes

that of Hirsch's 'Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know.' Prothero's particular urgency in relation to religion derives from the fact that there is not in American state schooling any explicit curriculum provision for addressing this deficit. (We return to Prothero's work below.)

Critics of Hirsch's programme have concentrated on two elements: (i) the controversial nature of attempting to enumerate the central constituents or 'core' of background knowledge (80% of which, Hirsch argues, is over 100 years old, compared to 20% of more peripheral and changeable knowledge), and (ii) the pedagogical implications of attempting to furnish or establish a 'background' of knowledge that precedes other elements of understanding (see Aldridge 2018a). Because of much ongoing mutual advocacy by the two University of Virginia Colleagues, E D Hirsch and Daniel Willingham, the pedagogy of cultural literacy has become closely associated (although it is not necessarily connected in principle) with instructional approaches advocated by Willingham and certain other cognitive psychologists (see Hirsch 2015; Willingham 2018), involving the cumulative memorisation of components of the schema through repetition and quizzing, paying attention to how many units of the schema can be held in working memory at any particular time ('cognitive load') (see Willingham 2009).

2.5 Powerful knowledge

Hirsch's project is often conflated in policy, guidance, and curriculum expression with Michael Young's advocacy of a 'powerful knowledge' curriculum, although the two rest respectively on independent theoretical and empirical work (see, for example, Gove 2013). Arguably only the invocation of the term 'knowledge' connects 'core knowledge' with 'powerful knowledge,' and the term is unpacked very differently by the two theorists.

Young's work develops a 'social realist' account of knowledge which accepts the social embeddedness of knowledge while at the same time rejecting an account of knowledge as purely socially constructed. A good summary is provided by the critical realist academic Leesa Wheelahan: 'World before word ... the academic disciplines are themselves complex realities; they are partly constituted by social relations because they are social products, but they are also partly constituted by the objects they seek to study' (2010: 74–5). 'Powerful knowledge' is at least partly conceptual, but it also includes shared disciplinary understandings and ways of going about things. For this reason, it is not as easily contrasted with 'skills' as its advocates would sometimes argue. Young seems to have in mind when he attacks a policy focus on 'skills' an emphasis on generic competences that neglect both foundational 'content' knowledge and the specialised ways of approaching enquiry that have developed in the academic disciplines (Young 2014); in any case Young's account of knowledge is certainly not susceptible to the sort of atomistic enumeration one finds in the 'knowledge planners' sometimes advocated by proponents of a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum.

What makes certain knowledge ‘powerful’ is its claimed emancipatory effect. In his earlier career Young developed a critique of ‘knowledge of the powerful,’ where curriculum is a means of control wielded in the interest of political or economic elites. The later ‘social realist’ Young does not completely reject the operation of power, political interest and contingent history in the work of academic communities, but argues that because those same academic communities are shaped, at least in part, in response to a deep engagement with the world they seek to describe, they are the repositories of a dynamic and evolving form of knowledge which has the power to take individuals beyond their own experience and ‘common sense’ so that they can recognise and embrace possibilities for the improvement of their own situations and those of others; in other words, to bring about real social change.

The curriculum is therefore developed, for Young, in response to young people’s entitlement to an appropriate foundation in powerful knowledge. If the contents of the curriculum seem to resemble the rather traditional academic ‘subjects,’ this is because of the historical relation of school subjects to the disciplinary communities at the forefront of knowledge production. Although not perfect, academic disciplines are the advocates of relatively stable and enduring practices for the successful production of knowledge in the various domains. A curriculum that turns to higher education and the research community for the constitution of its ‘subjects’ is, Young argues, as free as is possible from dangerous manipulation for particular transitory political or ideological ends (Young 2012).³

2.6 Literacy and education

When considering the question whether, how and to what extent the idea of religious literacy might be a way forward for religious education, it is important to highlight the educational assumptions underlying the idea of literacy itself. To put it differently: What kind of educational ‘project’ is entailed in the idea of literacy and, more specifically, in the ambition to make students literate or help them to become literate? The metaphor we wish to use here is that of ‘navigation,’ in order to highlight that being literate means that one is able find one’s way around in a particular domain or terrain. This is visible in the many domain-specific notions of literacy that have emerged in the educational discourse, including that of religious literacy itself. It is also assumed in the idea of literacy itself, which refers to the ability to navigate the domain of (written) language or of (a) discourse more generally.

³ Kueh, advocating a ‘powerful knowledge’ approach to religious education, cites Mary Earl’s hope of ‘reframing religious education (RE) so that we align it as closely as possible to other subjects on the school curriculum’ (Kueh 2017, p. 65). Advocates of a ‘powerful knowledge’ approach (see, for example, Aldridge 2014; 2018) have pointed out that its application to religious education is problematised by the subject’s lack of a clear disciplinary community with which to identify (Religious Studies? Theology? Philosophy?), which connects with the difficulty of specifying either the stratum of reality or the ‘concrete object of concern’ with which religious education is concerned (Aldridge 2015, pp. 163-166).

Literacy education can thus be understood as a process of socialisation through which one becomes acquainted with the ‘codes’ of a particular domain. Seen from the perspective of educational purpose, literacy education can be characterised as empowerment, as by becoming (more) literate, one gains the power to navigate a particular domain or terrain effectively. As a form of socialisation, literacy education not just has the potential to make the student into a ‘competent navigator,’ but also provides opportunities for identification with the particular terrain or domain, and thus potentially contributes to the formation of identity.

The question of power is not just an issue in relation to how individuals gain the power to navigate a particular domain effectively. As literacy scholars have highlighted – see, for example, Bernstein and Gee – different discourses or ‘semiotic domains’ (Gee 2003) have a different status within society, so that being literate in relation to one domain may give one much more navigational power than being literate in another domain. (Think, for example, of the difference between being literate in a Uralic language or in English, or the difference between being financially literate in using cash or in the global stock market.)

A more technical point in the discussion about literacy and literacy education, is that being literate is not just about the ability to navigate a terrain or domain effectively – it is not just a skill – but also entails an awareness of what one is doing when navigating such a domain. Being literate is not just about the ability to ‘do’ but includes an understanding of what one is doing. Literacy thus entails a reflective stance with regard to the domain and one’s ability to navigate it. Approaching the idea of literacy in terms of the metaphor of navigation helps to bring one of the key questions in the educational literature on literacy into view, which is the question who ‘defines’ the domain or terrain in which one is or becomes literate. To put it differently: it is one thing to be able to navigate a particular terrain or domain effectively, but it is an entirely different question whether it is desirable to navigate such a domain.⁴

This highlights the need to make a distinction between literacy education as empowerment – the ability, to use Freire’s phrase, of ‘reading the world’ – and literacy education as emancipation, where the question who has the right to ‘name the world’ comes into play (on the distinction between empowerment and emancipation in relation to literacy and education see Biesta 2012). The idea of *critical* literacy, as a purpose of education, seeks to express this dimension of literacy education, and provides a helpful opposition to the idea of *functional* literacy. If functional literacy is about the ability to

⁴ A historical example that highlights what is at stake here is the case of Rosa Parks who had no problem in understanding the message that white people could sit in the front section of the bus and coloured people had to sit in the back – and in that sense can be regarded as literate – but who objected to the particular way in which this ‘domain’ was defined.

navigate a particular domain effectively, critical literacy seeks to help students to raise questions about why the domain is what it is, who defines – or has the right to define – the rules, codes and boundaries of the domain. This, in turn, leads to the question of whether one should or shouldn't identify with the domain as it is, or should seek to change or redefine the domain. Here education shifts from socialisation to what can be termed 'subjectification' (Biesta 2010). Unlike socialisation, where one gains an identity within and in function of a particular semiotic or social domain, subjectification focuses on the question how one takes a position in relation to the existing state of affairs.

With regard to the question whether religious literacy can be a way forward for religious education it is, therefore, at least important to ponder the distinction between literacy education as empowerment (socialisation) and literacy education as emancipation (subjectification) and not to assume that there is only one 'modality' of literacy education. When doing so, a further question is what the possible relationship between empowerment and emancipation as educational 'agendas' or ambitions might be. One rather popular view is to see them as sequential, that is, to argue that before one can be critical about something and take a stance towards it, one needs to know what one is critical *about*. In such a line of thinking, socialisation is seen as a necessary (though not automatically a sufficient) *precondition* for emancipation.

At one level it makes sense to argue that one first needs to know the 'rules of the game' before one can raise critical questions about the rules and the game. Educationally, however, there is the question at which point the transition from 'domestication' to 'liberation' can take place and how this transition can be effected. This is captured in Immanuel Kant's formulation of what he termed the 'educational paradox,' which is the question how, as educators, we can 'cultivate freedom through coercion.' This discussion is ongoing in the literature on education and emancipation (for an overview see Biesta 2017). For the discussion about religious education all this raises the interesting question to what extent religious education can or should be a form of socialisation – a view which, quite quickly, may bring religious education back to a 'confessional' approach (religious education as recruitment in particular faith traditions) – or can or should be a form of emancipation.

2.7 Literacies and education

In reviewing literature on literacy and literacy education it becomes clear that literacy has undergone a metaphorical expansion from reading the text to reading the world, and in some cases a fragmentation into the idea that there are as many literacies as there are domains of human endeavour. What is also remarkable is that the discussion is characterised by a significant number of binary oppositions. These include:

- Written literacy versus oral literacy
- Literacy as an individual skill versus literacy as a social practice
- Literacy as emancipation versus literacy as empowerment

- Literacy as an economic tool verses literacy as enlightenment
- Literacy as a utilitarian tool verses literacy as reflection of 'free time' (to be enjoyed)
- Illiteracy as deficit verses the recognition of multiple literacies that are of value in different contexts
- Literacy as decoding or comprehension verses literacy as embodied activity or meaningful comportment
- Literacy as relating to a domain verses literacy as going beyond or questioning a particular domain
- Literacy as functional verses literacy as critical

Against this background, therefore, we want to suggest a distinction between functional ('useful') conceptions of literacy and critical (really useful) conceptions of literacy. Within the functional conception of literacy there are more or less narrow notions, ranging from the ability to decode texts or memorise propositionally defined schemata, to the ability (or practice, or mode of comportment) to navigate a particular given domain or set of domains. Even what is implied by the term 'domain' would need to be questionable within the critical conception.

What distinguishes critical literacy from functional literacy is that critical literacy involves an ability to question offered domains and take responsibility for defining them. It may be that functional literacy is a prerequisite for critical literacy, but an activity directed only toward developing functional literacy cannot be properly considered educational. So, conceptions of literacy can be more or less narrow and they can also be more or less educational.

3. RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND ITS EDUCATIONAL COMPONENTS

In order to interrogate educational assumptions underlying existing considerations of the relationship between religious literacy and religious education, it is likely to be useful to reflect briefly on the history of religious education in England in maintained schools in England since the late 19th century. Religious education in England took a significant turn following 19th century educational reforms. The Education Act of 1870, known as the 'Forster Act,' 'set out to fill the gaps in voluntary provision of schools' (Matthews 1968, p. 7) which, until that time, had by and large been provided by religious agencies. Prior to the 1870 Act the largest provider of schools was the Church of England's National Society established in 1811, aiming to ensure a school in every parish. 19th century educational reform took place in the context of other social and economic changes of the period. Religious education in the maintained education sector in England, came about as a consequence of accommodations successive governments made with different 'religious agencies' (see Cox 1983, p. 3).

A special relationship was established at the very beginning between the 'religious agencies' in England and the government's wider educational intentions. In the period leading up to the First World War, bitter theological controversy raged between Christian denominations about the nature of religious education (see Cox 1983, p.3) or religious instruction (RI) as it was more commonly known at this time. At the same time there were other challenges to the power of the relationship that had been established between the government and the churches regarding education, for example from emerging secular movements such as the Moral Instruction League (see Freathy 2008, p. 297). Although other forms of moral education also began to be developed, they were 'rarely outside a Christian moral framework' (Freathy 2008, p. 297).

By 1944 a range of social factors and educational concerns led to the transformation of maintained education. The architects of the 1944 Education Act ensured religious education became compulsory in all schools receiving public funds. However, despite making religious education compulsory, the act 'never specifies what religion was to be taught' (Cox 1983, p. 5). Instead, 'parliament handed over the definition of it to the representatives of the Churches and the educational administrators' (Cox 1983, p. 5) whilst assuming religious education would be instrumental in re-moralising the nation after two world wars.

Religious education's socialisation purposes were therefore recognised as critical to its inclusion in the 1944 Education Act and couched in almost exclusively Christian terms. Importantly however, educationalists themselves were not engaged with defining religious education; where there was involvement until this point it was concerned only with determining its continued presence in maintained schools. This ensured that

religious education emerged into the second half of the 20th century with persistent assumptions regarding both what it should achieve educationally as well as in terms of what counted as religion. Significantly perhaps, for the purposes of this report, all this was happening at the same time as literacy itself was increasingly taken as a general purpose of publicly funded education.

From the late 1950's confessional approaches to religious education came under scrutiny, challenged from psychology, philosophy and theology, as the religious and social composition of England underwent rapid transformation. The work of Yeaxley and Loukes (see Cox 1983, p. 13) brought challenges from psychology noting children were remembering very little of what they had been taught and furthermore often misunderstood what they did remember. Goldman (1964 and 1965) and Hyde (1965) drew on the insights of Piaget raising questions about children's cognitive capabilities at different ages.

Meanwhile the emerging educational philosophy of for example Paul Hirst (see 1965, p.5) challenged assumptions made about the role of religion in individuals' lives as well as in society and the public sphere in terms of moral formation. At this time new theological questions, for example about the nature of God and faith (see for example Robinson 1963 and Tillich 1962), led to discussions within the church itself about how the Christian faith could be passed on in a faith specific context. These numerous challenges to confessional religious education came also in the context of the rapid transformation of the religious and cultural composition of England as a consequence of migrations to Britain from the New Commonwealth. All this focused attention on what was to count as religion in religious education.

A particularly influential response to this question came in the 1970's from the phenomenological approach to the study of religion. A significant move being when the Schools Council Secondary Project appointed Ninian Smart to its directorship in 1969. The Schools' Council Working Paper 36 '*religious education in Secondary Schools*' (W.P. 36) was published in 1971 to be followed in 1977 by '*A Groundplan for the Study of Religion*.' Both drew heavily on arguments Smart had developed regarding the relationship between the phenomenological study of religion and non-denominational religious education. Nevertheless, assumptions persisted regarding the socialisation purposes of religious education; religion was essentially good for people and knowing something about religion was in some way good for those growing up in a complex plural society.

Once 'religion' in religious education was accepted as being not only Christianity, there was a line of argument that suggested what was needed was a new approach to the study of religion in religious education, one capable of overcoming challenges in relation to religious plurality. However, a focus on socialisation purposes led to making new kinds of links between religious education and character development and Christian

confessionalism (see Barnes 2000). The relevant point here is that it seems highly likely that these moves not only missed broader educational questions, especially about emancipation, but under the influence of the objective stance of the phenomenological approach to the study of religion missed some important aspects of what it means to live a religious life.

The central focus of religious education has been on religion, and since frequently this has conceptualised religion as propositional belief or as tradition (see Hannam 2018 for a longer discussion on this point) it has been possible to assume a strong association between a particular iteration of religious literacy and religious education. Although we want to acknowledge the influence especially of Grimmit (e.g. 1987) and the possibility of the child 'learning from religion' rather than only 'learning about religion,' our point is that all too often the teacher's role has been limited to a 'facilitator of learning' (see Biesta and Hannam 2016). This is because religious education has been assumed to be about transmitting information about religious beliefs and practices, and further that such knowing and understanding of 'others' beliefs and practices would somehow have a beneficial effect on society.

Hannam and Biesta (see for example Hannam 2018 and Biesta and Hannam 2016, 2019) ask what might happen were religious education to be considered in broader educational terms; that is not only in relation to socialisation but also in relation to subjectification and emancipation and in relation to people being together 'in the manner of speech and action' (Arendt 1998, p. 1999). This is when religion in religious education is not only considered as beliefs and practices, but also in existential terms has a significant place. Here the role of the teacher will shift away from only being a 'facilitator' of children's learning, towards being the one with responsibility for opening a space where education can happen. Here religious education is to be understood in existential terms and as a 'place of appearance.' Religious education's emancipatory purposes are taken seriously and understood in terms of Arendt's ideas in relation to action. Further, religion is also conceptualised in existential terms as faith rather than only as belief and practice.

Significantly when these two elements come together, it is argued (see Hannam 2018, p. 120 & Biesta and Hannam 2019) that religious education has something distinctive to bring to education as a whole. Further a consequence of this approach is that it will have a particularly important part to play in relation to emancipation and to assuring the existence of freedom in the public sphere in just the way Arendt understands. What is at stake here is the difference religious education could make to a group of people merely living together and the educative possibility of them existing together in human togetherness. This highlights the political dimensions of religious education, but in the service of education, not as a social good in its own right.

Whereas some authors make a strong case for the role of knowledge in religious education, it is possible to approach religious education from a different angle. One such

approach is that of David Aldridge, who argues for religious education to be informed by a conception of education that draws on philosophical hermeneutics (Aldridge 2018a). Aldridge's approach emphasises the central role of understanding in education but should be distinguished from the 'hermeneutisation' of religious education recently identified by Hannam and Biesta (2019). Rather than focusing on 'meanings' (Aldridge cites Gadamer's recognition that what is understood is not the meaning but the entity) (2015, p. 186), Aldridge stresses the existential significance of understanding, following Heidegger's reformulation of hermeneutics as the universal philosophical problem: the human being is 'the understanding which interprets' (Heidegger 1962, p. 62).

Central to Aldridge's account would be his claim that understanding constitutes the *being* of the child, as opposed to more limited epistemological conceptions that emphasise what the child *knows*. He argues that 'Philosophical hermeneutics describes understanding in ontological terms of openness, directedness and transformation rather than in terms of the acquisition of explicit propositional "content"' (2018a, p. 247) and that 'philosophical hermeneutics attempts to describe how we comport ourselves or "live understandingly"' (ibid., p. 247). Aldridge challenges the 'textual priority' of some hermeneutical approaches and argues instead for the paradigmatic model of dialogue in philosophical hermeneutics. Drawing on the work of Marielle Macé in literary studies, Aldridge (2018b) has developed an account of education that recognises a continuum of 'stylistics of existence' whereby 'reading is merely a particular case, one among many exercises in modalising the self, the crucial mannerism at work in every kind of behaviour – from ways of perceiving to crafting a gesture or an utterance' (Macé 2013, p. 221).

Aldridge (2018a) identifies the educational moment as one of 'becoming' in which a student is transformed in terms of the orientation of his or her being towards the subject matter rather than emphasising the making of explicit judgments. In terms advocated in this report, this would be consistent with thinking of religious education as navigation rather than in terms of propositional claims. This is not to say that the hermeneutical approach does not acknowledge a 'critical' or emancipatory element to education. Every moment of understanding, Aldridge contends, involves taking a stance in relation to what is understood that transforms one's 'prejudices' or 'biases of openness toward the world' (2018a, p. 247).

Aldridge's work also involves an intervention on the matter of the extent to which education is determined to be either 'student-led' or 'teacher-led'; understanding entails arriving at a shared concern or subject matter that is 'not the achievement of either teacher or student; it 'befalls' them or transcends their individual efforts' (2018a, p. 249). Since this shared subject matter cannot be determined in advance of the educational dialogue between student and teacher, the 'to and fro' movement or indeterminacy of the hermeneutical moment extends beyond classroom interaction and into curriculum design.

‘Offering’ any curriculum object in religious education involves tentativeness or indeterminacy in that a given curriculum frame or rationale cannot prescribe or contain the possible shared concern that might emerge. A teacher’s justifications of the value of any curriculum object in religious education (her relevant educational ‘prejudices’) therefore always become questionable and risk transformation in the engagement with the child or young person. In terms advocated earlier in this report, this would bring into question the supposed ‘ownership’ of religious education by particular academic questions, and instead would be open and critical about the ‘domains’ within which religious education is to take place.

4. RELIGIOUS LITERACY AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Having reviewed the literature on literacy and literacy education and having looked briefly at (recent) developments in the field of religious education, we now turn to a discussion of the idea of religious literacy, particularly focusing on ways in which these ideas have been discussed in the context of (religious) education.

4.1 The emergence of the notion of ‘religious literacy’

The term ‘religious literacy’ has become a widely used and recognised one within contemporary discourse on religious education. Just as ‘literacy’ is a relatively new term which has undergone significant changes in meanings, the same is especially true of ‘religious literacy.’ These days there is little, if anything, which is striking about coupling the terms ‘religious’ and ‘literacy.’ However, prior to the publication of Wright’s *Religious education in the Secondary school: Prospects for Religious literacy* (1993) it is difficult to find any examples of advocates of religious education using or referring to it. An early example of the phrase is found in a short article in the American journal *Religious Education* by Ward in 1953 titled *The Right to Religious Literacy*.

The following year the sociologist Vladimir de Lissovoy (1954) published an article on *A Sociological Approach to Religious Literacy*. However, in less than three decades the term ‘religious literacy’ has become an integral part of numerous debates and analysis concerning religious education. Although Wright’s work has been highly influential, our findings are that the emergence of ‘religious literacy’ as a central concept is not just down to the strength of his assessment of the challenges facing secondary school religious education. We have found that a number of other factors have fuelled both the widespread use of the term and the range of ways in which ‘religious literacy’ can be defined.

To begin with the context for Wright’s 1993 book amongst educational theorists, policy makers and classroom practitioners made the linking of literacy with religion straightforward and almost intuitively meaningful. In the early 1990’s in England and Wales, the educational focus was on implementing the National Curriculum (following the 1988 Education Reform Act) with its emphasis on the delivery of basic skills in literacy and numeracy as a shared priority for all subjects across the curriculum. The drive was to improve schools by making them more effective at teaching and learning and an important part of this was ensuring pupils gained functional literacy and basic numeracy.

As part of the National Curriculum progress tests in English, Maths and Science had been introduced at pivotal points in a child’s career through their school (at 7, 11, 14 and 16). For policy makers and teachers, the spotlight was firmly on literacy and ensuring progress in the core subjects in the curriculum. At the same time the developments in the sociology and politics of literacy (known as the New Literacy Studies) had allowed the concept of

'literacy' to take on a richer set of meanings. In the early 1990's theorists were at the vanguard of demonstrating that literacy is not merely the activity of becoming functionally literate. Rather becoming literate is more akin to being able to navigate a complex range of social practices. The New Literacy Studies fostered and advocated the idea of multi-literacies and loosened the traditional meanings around literacy. However, against this context, there was an intuitive appeal in referring to 'religious literacy' in the way Wright did.

In effect Wright framed his arguments about the need for critical religious education in terms of improving the prospects for better religious literacy. The primary way to do something about the problem of low standards of religious literacy is to introduce Wright's approach to religious education, namely to prioritise the place of truth claims in religious beliefs. According to Wright's analysis the decline in religious literacy is rooted in the developments in religious education following collapse in traditional confessional argument for the subject. Wright finds many of the stances taken by advocates for religious education to be deeply flawed. He rejects the phenomenological approach and argues against a relativistic approach. This is because as Hannam (2018, p. 45-6) explains, 'Ultimately Wright is looking for a new approach to religious education that can weave back together divisions he sees opened up in the Enlightenment between reason and experience, placing this within a contemporary understanding of education in a liberal democracy.' It is this project, rather than religious literacy which is his primary focus. It serves as a useful lens from which to launch his critique of contemporary religious education.

According to Wright religious literacy is 'the ability ... to reflect, communicate and act in an informed, intelligent and sensitive manner towards the phenomenon of religion' (1993 p. 47). As a child engages in critical religious education she is encountering the real world and needs to engage with the truth and knowledge claims that religions are imbued with. Thus the 'mark of a religiously educated child being that of their ability to embark on a conversation with and about religion that reflects increasing levels of wisdom, insight, intelligence and informed and balanced judgement' (1998 p. 68). Through religious education a child is introduced to religious narrative and it is this which brings her into a relationship with transcendent reality. Wright couches this in terms of bringing about a critical dialogue between the horizon of the child and the horizon of religion (2000 p. 179). Thus, through critical religious education the decline in religious literacy could be halted and reversed.

The narrative of a decline in religious literacy is a theme which others have picked up, most notably Prothero (2007, 2014) and Moore (2006, 2014). Their context of North America means their arguments are more general and not primarily concerned with Wright's critique of the aims and content of religious education in the school curriculum. According to Prothero in contemporary America there is an urgent need to deal with the

very poor levels of religious literacy. His analysis depicts the USA as a deeply religious country however Americans have little knowledge about religion.

Prothero maintains that in the past Americans had very good levels of religious literacy but in recent decades this has declined to an unacceptable level. His response is to publish a work aimed at the general public that spells out what is needed. This text, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – And Doesn't* hammers home the paucity of religious knowledge and understanding across American society as a whole. Religious literacy is needed 'to help citizens participate fully in social, political and economic life in nation and a world in which religion counts' (2007 p. 15).

According to Prothero, religious literacy is 'the ability to understand and use the basic building blocks of religious traditions – their terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors, and narratives' (2007 p. 15). Religious literacy can, in Prothero's analysis be broken down to further sub-divisions which include ritual literacy, confessional literacy and denominational literacy. To be able to remedy the widespread religious illiteracy, dedicated courses must be introduced to public schools and university courses. A large section of Prothero's book stipulates the information about Christianity and other world religions that needs to be known and understood by Americans if they are to regain their religious literacy.

Prothero's analysis draws broadly on the argument developed by Hirsch (1987) who advocated the dire need for cultural literacy. Contemporary schooling is disadvantaging children by failing to hand on the ability to understand and navigate our culture. Prothero casts the spotlight on the specifically religious aspects of American culture. Others like Moore have blended together aspects of cultural studies as a way of overcoming religious illiteracy. As such religious literacy is defined by her as entailing 'the ability to discern and analyse the fundamental intersections of religion and social, political, cultural life through multiple lenses' (2006, p. 1).

Moore specifies the characteristic of a 'religiously literate' person in terms of their understanding and ability in relation to religions: '1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place' (ibid.). The emphasis is on understanding the ways in which religion is a fundamental and integral feature of human life. A person who is deficient in this knowledge and understanding could be considered as religiously illiterate.

For Prothero and Moore there is a shared concern about the need to tackle the decline in religious literacy for the good of society. Given that religion is a ubiquitous feature of life and deeply woven into the shared history and culture of a nation state like America, a

basic level of religious literacy is something all citizens need. One obvious way to tackle this urgent problem is to introduce courses in high schools and as part of university courses. In a North American context this is a controversial stance because the strict separation between state and church in the American constitution has led to a curriculum in public schools which is devoid of religious education. Prothero's argument is that for the good of society it is essential that at school or university young people learn the key information that will make them at least minimally 'religiously literate.'

The argument that improved religious literacy is needed for the good of society has been picked up by a number of others in the UK, in particular Dinham. Religious literacy is important because it would appear that too many of us have lost the ability to talk about religion in the public sphere. This puts us at a severe disadvantage because religion is a central aspect of human life. Religion permeates the public sphere and being able to both recognise this fact and engage with it (whether it be in universities, schools or welfare provision) is an ability which needs to be fostered and enhanced. Dinham maintains that there is 'an urgent need to re-skill public professionals and citizens for the daily encounter with the full range of religious plurality' (2014 p. 110).

The strength of religious literacy as a concept is that it can be viewed as a framework for thinking through the implications and challenges of religions, beliefs and world views in different situations and real-life contexts. Religious literacy can be understood as 'both generalizable and context-specific, exploring how it plays out in variety of public practices and settings in the real contemporary world' (2014 p. 3). He explains that 'religious literacy resides, then in an improved quality of conversation about the category of religion and religious belief itself, which first of all irons out all of the muddled binaries and assumptions...' (p. 14).

Dinham (and his associates, Shaw and Francis) operate with an understanding of religious literacy that is sensitive to the fact that there are a range of alternate definitions for what it involves. Dinham argues that 'religious literacy, then is a stretchy, fluid concept that is variously configured and applied ... [and this] is very much how it should be ... religious literacy is necessarily a non-didactic idea that must be adapted as appropriate to specific environments...' (2016, p. 257). Dinham proposes that religious literacy is best understood as a framework. As such it is concerned with 'seeking to inform intelligent, thoughtful and rooted approaches to religious faith that countervail unhelpful knee jerk reactions based on fear and stereotype' (ibid., p. 266). Religion and belief are key parts of the lives of a majority of people around the world, and as such there is a shared need to be able to speak with others in a way which appreciates and recognises this.

4.2 The growing consensus on the importance of religious literacy

In characterising the serious social and civic need for religious literacy Dinham, Shaw, Francis, Prothero and Moore are making a solid sociological analysis. Religion, belief and faith are integral features of human life and culture and given this reality the way we

engage with others, particularly in the public sphere, ought to be aware and respectful of this. It is important to recognise that this analysis reflects the profound changes in the sociology of religion regarding the ‘secularisation thesis.’ Social theorists such as Bergin (1967) used to confidently and routinely predict the decline in religious observance and belief, particularly in Western or developed economies. These views have had to be heavily revised, not least because it has become apparent that religion shows little sign of previously predicted widespread decline.

In key aspects of public life there is a need to appreciate that there is not an inevitable movement towards secularisation. Examples can be drawn from the media (Wakelin & Spencer 2016), social work (Crisp 2016), classroom religious education (Conroy 2016), welfare provision (Dinham 2016) and from higher education (Jones 2016) that demonstrate the contemporary inability to appropriately engage with the religious faith of so many people within society. In particular there has been an ongoing tendency to crudely stereotype religious believers and fail to appreciate the diversity of belief within the same religion. Being able to both recognise this religious diversity and to be able to converse or dialogue with religious believers in the light of this, requires a very high standard of religious literacy. Although Prothero, Moore and Dinham are primarily concerned with religious literacy rather than religious education, there may well be an implicit criticism about the quality of the latter in the UK. Unlike the USA, the compulsory nature of religious education in the UK has been mandated by government legislation since the 1944 Butler Education Act. Perhaps in the UK, the decline in religious literacy that Dinham draws attention to is not just down to wider cultural and socio-political developments. It may well also be a result of the kind of religious education that children are receiving. It is here that Wright’s stance would chime with Dinham’s analysis about the dire need for improved religious literacy in religious education.

However, Wright is one of a number of theorists who have drawn attention to serious concerns about religious education in the UK. Many of these are centred around a reaction to the phenomenological approach heavily influenced by Smart. For example, Jackson (1997) argued in favour of religious education that focuses on what could be called the interpretative approach. Students need to interpret and reflect on the significance of religious beliefs, with the aim of helping them work out their own ideas and views in relation to the plurality of religious beliefs that they encounter in the classroom and world around them. Another line of criticism facing religious education has come from Barnes’ stark analysis (2006) that the nature of religion has been seriously misrepresented over many decades in British schools.

Although the intention may well have been benign (in order to contribute to the social aims of education), the result is that religious education has attempted to promote tolerance by downplaying and deliberately ignoring the diversity and clear differences between and within religions. Instead of serving social cohesion this kind of religious

education has failed to help young people gain the conceptual skills to be able to handle and respect difference. In addition to Jackson, Barnes and Wright there are others who have raised deep concerns over the current approaches to religious education, including Cooling (2004), Erricker (2010), Bowie (2018), and Hannam (2018).

In the light of the contested nature of religious education in the UK it is relatively easy to maintain like Conroy (2016) that the decline in religious literacy is in large part down to what has been happening in this part of the curriculum. However, a possible response to this analysis is that in reality a significant proportion of school children are not actually receiving any religious education. This has been recently reaffirmed in the evidence presented in the *Final Report for the Commission of RE* (2018), which points out that in a large number of schools the statutory guidelines for religious education are not being followed. Up to a third of all young people in secondary school are not receiving any religious education. However, the point remains that declining religious literacy is almost impossible to avoid, even if students are actually receiving religious education lessons.

4.3 Religious literacy and religious education

The term religious literacy has emerged as dominant theme in religious education because it brings together two clusters of arguments. The first are about the aims and content of the subject: is it possible to make religious literacy a primary goal of religious education in order to ensure young people can navigate a world in which the religious other is an inevitable part of life? The second are arguments about justifying the place of religious education in the curriculum as an entitlement that all must receive. It is one of the core competencies that all children need to develop as part-and-parcel of their education and schooling. All students need to have religious education lessons because they need to become religiously literate.

The discourse about religious literacy covers more than questions about the aims and contents of religious education in schools. The broader aspect of religious literacy is clearly demonstrated in the UK Parliamentary report (2016) on *Improving religious literacy: A contribution to the debate*. At a number of times this report reiterates the observation that religious literacy is a broader issue than religious education. The report is highly supportive of religious education in schools and recognises that it has a key role to play in developing religious literacy. However, both the workplace and community initiatives have important roles to play in fostering increased levels of religious literacy across society as whole. It is this broader sense of religious literacy in relation to religion that will be considered here in Part 5.

In recent decades, at the socio-political level there has been an increased awareness of the need for religious literacy in many aspects of public life. In the work place and in the media, there has been a growing awareness about questions connected with religion and religious belief. Often these have been because of concerns over social cohesion or questions relating to national security and terrorism associated with religious extremism.

For example, both the Cantile (2001) and Ously (2001) reports into rioting and social unrest in some cities in the North of England in the year 2001 drew attention to religion being a source of division between different parts of the community. Alongside political concerns about the relationships between social cohesion and religion, there have also been significant developments amongst social theorists in relation to the nature and place of religion in society.

The widespread rejection of the ‘secularisation thesis,’ which depicted an inevitable decline in organised religion, has been replaced by a more positive and nuanced appreciation of the place of religion in society. Indeed sociologists (for example see Johanson 2013) now routinely refer to the post-secular context of contemporary society. Religion is an enduring feature of human life and as such there is no obvious reason why it ought not be brought into almost all socio-political analysis. Both amongst social theorists and political leaders there has emerged an evident recognition about the importance of being able to talk about religion in an informed and open way. The need to be able to bring religion and religious issues into a range of conversations has glided almost seamlessly into a widespread use of the term religious literacy. There is a contemporary need to be able to speak about and engage with religion and this can be readily couched as being religiously literate.

This is aptly illustrated in the four elements that are part of the definition of religious literacy used in the APPG report *Improving religious literacy: A contribution to the debate* (2016).

Religious literacy can be understood as composing four main elements:

- A basic level of knowledge about both the particular beliefs, practices and traditions of the main religious traditions in Britain, and of the shape of our changing religious landscape today. This must be complemented by a conceptual understanding of what religious belief systems are, and how they may function in the lives of individuals.
- An awareness of how beliefs, inherited traditions and textual interpretations might manifest into the actions, practices and daily lives of individuals. Crucial to this is an understanding of the diversity within religious traditions, and an awareness of the way in which the same text, or religious principle, can be interpreted in different ways by different individuals.
- A critical awareness, meaning that an individual has the ability to recognise, analyse and critique religious stereotypes, and engage effectively with, and take a nuanced approach towards, the questions raised by religion.

- A sophisticated ability to engage with religious groups in a way which promotes respect and plurality, and which enables effective communication about religion. (page 6, paragraph 2.3)

The APPG report couches these elements in terms of skills that can be acquired, from basic to more advanced levels. The first element focuses on knowing about specific religions and why these beliefs and practices might function in an individual's life. The other three elements seek to grasp at what needs to be known and understood about a religion if we are to be able to talk and deal with religion and religious people. This is essentially a capabilities approach to being religiously literate. It is interesting to recognise that this definition of religious literacy is couched in positive and all-embracing terms. There is an implicit assumption that gaining this knowledge and these capabilities about a religion will provide a way of responding to and overcoming religious stereotypes and it leads to the promotion of respect. As such, religious literacy is highly desirable and will presumably contribute to social cohesion.

The focus in this section has been to describe the emergence of the term religious literacy. In the three decades since Wright coupled the terms 'religious' and 'literacy' as a stepping stone in his argument for critical religious education, it has become a central theme in the discourse of about the aims and scope of religious education. Moreover, it has become a key theme in the reappraisal of the secularisation thesis and the practical issues surrounding how best to engage with those who hold religious beliefs. Having described the dominant ways in which religious literacy is characterised it is time to present a critical discussion of the issues raised by this term.

4.4 'Religious literacy' considered

On first impression, it could appear that there are too many competing definitions of religious literacy. However, a closer look indicates that there are a narrower set of concerns that most of them share. Namely, that there are key terms or chunks of information about different religions that need to be known. For some it might be knowledge of the truth claims in religious ideas or knowledge and understanding of the diversity within and between different religions. Alternatively, it could be socially useful knowledge of the others who are religious. Nevertheless, the common thread is that it is knowledge and understanding that allows one to navigate different domains in life. The glaring issue however, is who decides what is the important religious information that needs to be known by all children? Nevertheless, such approaches to religious literacy lead to a preoccupation with key terms and rather superficial information about religion and belief. A feature of such a narrow approach to religious literacy is that it can result in the various lists of 'key concepts' that for example Prothero (and others) have ended up with. This is a problem in two respects. First, it results in a stunted account of religious education, one that is pre-occupied with handing on religious information. Second, it reflects an impoverished account of literacy. It could be likened to learning the ABC, which is an important first step, but it is not sufficient.

The differing definitions of religious literacy advocated by Wright, Moore, Prothero, and Dinham presuppose what it means to be religiously literate. For Wright a religiously literate person is able to engage in sophisticated conversations about religion and with religious believers. However, it is not clear how much these religious conversations are part of daily life. For Prothero the religiously literate person does more than gaining high scores in a religious literacy questionnaire; they can identify the specifically religious aspects that permeate the wider culture of the USA. Their cultural literacy is such that they are fluent in recognising and appreciating the religious ideas and themes embedded within it.

For Dinham the religiously literate person is able to 'deal' with the reality of religion and religious belief within our society and in many others around the world. This can be couched in positive terms. Out of respect for the beliefs and values of all others we need to know about their religious beliefs and how these might influence them. This is a tricky and demanding task because there is much diversity between religions and even within the same religion. The religiously literate person is able to communicate with others in a way which appreciates their religious beliefs. Being able to communicate in this way matters at the socio-political level, particularly in matters of welfare and education. The religiously literate person has the intelligence and thoughtfulness to be able to converse with others in society in a way which respectfully recognises their religious beliefs. Thus, to be a religiously literate person is to be knowledgeable and sensitively informed about religious issues. Although religiously literate people clearly have many agreeable characteristics it is important to draw attention to some of the underlying assumptions, some of which are less positive.

One assumption relates to the positive stance taken about the importance of religion for the individual and at the socio-political level. Dinham, Prothero, Moore and Wright want to affirm the significance of religion for human beings. At the very least it matters at the historical and cultural level. The assumption is that religion is a highly significant feature of human life. Whilst the secularisation thesis unfairly dismisses the importance of religion, there is a need to consider whether or not advocates of religious literacy overestimate the significance of religion in human life. How this is answered no doubt reflects cultural assumptions. For example, in the UK in recent centuries a low-key approach has been taken towards being religious, however in other cultural contexts being religious might be a much bigger part of shared identity. Although as a matter of contingent fact large swathes of the human race have religious affiliations, it is a more open question about what to make of this situation. It raises the question of why this feature of human life matters.

One answer might be because being religious is something which is tricky or nebulous and as such it needs to be handled carefully. If we want to foster social cohesion or utilise social capital for some positive end, then being aware and sensitive to the religious beliefs

of others makes sense. This more instrumental stance towards religion may well lead onto another assumption: the tendency to characterise 'religion' as something to be handled or managed. Given that others in society are religious and as such we need to know about this, it serves the common good if we can talk or dialogue with others about their religious 'beliefs.' However, this carries with it the further assumption that what it means to live a life with a religious sensibility or 'orientation' is always the same as holding a set of beliefs or following a set of practices, that can be known and understood in some way by others. However, it is important to appreciate the negative connotations at play with this second assumption. Some, possibly many, others around us are religious and given this situation we need to be able to talk with 'them' in a special way.

However, there are at least two problems with this. The first is that it leads to the view which characterises the 'religious' other as a potential problem to be managed. The issue here has been summed up in Barnes and Smith's observation that 'A religious literacy that reduces static religious practices into behavioural norms carries the danger of dehumanisation and limiting understanding. The religious 'other' should not be viewed as subject or object, but as human instantiation of virtues of mutual respect and disclosure' (2016, p. 82). There would appear to be an inherent negative assumption that 'we' need to be literate about the 'religious' other. Secondly it assumes that being religious is always either manifested in a group of people who hold a set of propositional beliefs that are 'believed,' or that being religious is manifested by the following of a set of 'practices' or 'traditions,' again which set that group apart from others. What this view misses, is a way of seeing what it means to be religious in terms of existence. That is as a particular way of being aware, not usually precisely in a cognitive sense, and leading one's life in light of that awareness. This way of understanding what it means to live a religious life, although perhaps particularly revealed in the Dharmic religious traditions, is present across all religions and beyond (see Hannam 2018. pp. 87ff for a fuller discussion).

In addition to these assumptions there are some practical issues about the concept of religious literacy. To begin with, just how much religious literacy is actually needed to navigate the public sphere of life? Another practical issue is around the difficulties of bringing about religious literacy, that is to the desired or necessary level of competence. Dinham and Wright want a level of literacy that allows for sophisticated and detailed discussions and opportunities for dialogue. This goes much further than a functional religious literacy where one could navigate for example the key differences and similarities between Sikhism and Islam. Moreover, how many 'religions' does a student need to learn about in order to become religiously literate?

This links with a more fundamental question about whether or not one could be literate about religion more generally. Is religious literacy primarily about being able to speak/converse about a number of different religions or is there a sense in which after learning about two or three you can speak more generally about religion. If it is the latter, is this a return to

the stance of Smart and phenomenology. The nagging suspicion is that religious literacy does not resolve the controversies about pinning down the aims and content of religious education, but rather simply reframes them in alternate terminology. If this is the case, is the terminology of religious literacy actually needed, since it could be argued that it only serves to add a further complex layer.

There are two further issues about religious literacy that trigger concerns about its usefulness for underpinning religious education. First, have theorists of religious education inadvertently lifted the concept of literacy in a way which divests it of its richer meanings? Have the likes of Wright and Conroy used the term religious literacy (and religious illiteracy) in way that largely ignores the developments within the New Literacy Studies? If these richer insights about literacy are applied to religious education perhaps a more nuanced account of religious literacy might crystallise into shape. Second, how might theological insights challenge ways of characterising religious literacy? For example, within Christian theology Jesus is depicted as the Word of God, and the very particular theology of revelation then draws attention to the Word God speaks to bring about salvation.

4.5 The concept of ‘religion’ in religious literacy

It is important to recognise and appreciate that the term religious literacy does have a wider currency and relevance, over and above its relationship with religious education. This is linked with some fundamental issues about the possible significance of religion in human existence and enduring distinctions and assumptions about the secular state. However, it is important to raise an important critical observation about the broader usage of religious literacy. Essentially this is down to the complexity that surrounds ‘religion’ as a concept. Framing religious literacy in terms of being able to talk and engage with others who are religious brings with it a deep-seated tendency to generalise about what it is to be religious, and frequently only in terms of religion as ‘beliefs and practices.’ There has been an ongoing discussion about whether or not ‘religion’ is a public or private matter. However, typically the distinction has only been drawn between religion as being primarily about holding a range of theological (or religious) beliefs over and against it being about engaging in religious practices. For the former, to be religious is to hold certain propositions to be true. To be religiously literate about this way of understanding religion is to be able to know about, understand and critique these religious propositions.

Alternatively, if to be religious is primarily about practice of religion it follows that acquiring literacy involves knowing about and understanding the rituals and practices of someone who is religious. One of the challenges is to work out in a given religion what the balance of emphasis comes to: is it on propositional beliefs or on engagement in religious practices? However, religion conceptualised in existential terms has usually been absent in this kind of a discussion about religious literacy and so too often the contribution of the Dharmic or mystical aspects of the Abrahamic religious traditions have been left out of the conversation altogether.

In recent years various theorists (for example see Barnes 2014, Dinham 2015 and Panjwani 2018) have cogently argued that approaching what it is to be religious in these terms is highly problematic. This is because insufficient attention is paid to the profound religious diversity that characterises all religions. The emphasis should be on learning how to recognise and appreciate the diversity found amongst all those who are religious. Within the same religion there is a rich diversity in terms of both beliefs held and practices engaged with. Whilst the analysis of Barnes, Panjwani and Dinham is compelling, it does trigger a serious practical problem for religious literacy. Namely, given the sheer diversity of religious beliefs, acquiring the basic knowledge and capabilities of religious literacy is a herculean undertaking. Casting the spotlight on religious diversity leads to an unintended but serious consequence about just how much ‘basic’ knowledge is needed to grasp even just two or three religious traditions.

The issue here comes down to how religion is conceptualised, and the dominant approaches share the tendency to characterise ‘religion’ and being ‘religious’ as an object of study. Indeed, for a long time, religion has been classified as primarily something private and separate to the public sphere of life. However, in the post-secular context there has been a reframing of religion and this could allow for the focus to be shifted away from the object of religion and onto the subject of religion.

In this new way of framing things, the question of ‘religion’ then becomes more like what does it mean for someone to live life religiously? There is of course a plethora of ways in which this has been answered. Anthropologists, philosophers, theologians, devotees from different traditions and belief systems have offered different ways of answering or responding to this question. However, one neglected way of responding to this question has been from that of the educator. How might an educator answer the question of what does it mean to live life religiously? What are the educational questions here? In Part 4 we have argued that the educator’s answer has the potential to help reframe religious literacy, and what this might mean for religious literacy as a way forward for religious education will now be considered.

5. A WAY FORWARD FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION?

The overall ambition of the project underlying this report has been to provide clarity about the idea of religious literacy and its possible significance for religious education. For this, we have sought to reconstruct dimensions of discussions about literacy and literacy education and have also sought to summarise and review main strands of recent work on religious literacy, particularly in the context of education, both ‘general’ education and religious education especially. To provide background for the latter, we have also included a section in which we document some of the main positions and recent developments in the field of religious education. Our aim in all this has not been to articulate a particular position, and also not to defend the idea of religious literacy as an aim and organising principle for religious education. Rather, we have tried to reveal the complexity of the discussion, hoping that this may assist in further discussions about the future of religious education and the role, or not, that religious literacy may play in it.

In response to the question posed in the title of this report, that is, whether religious literacy is a way forward for religious education, we would therefore say: ‘it depends.’ It depends first, on how one understands literacy. Secondly religious literacy also depends upon how one wishes to understand religion itself; and for both literacy and religion there is a significant variety of interpretations. Most importantly, regarding the future of religious education and the possible role religious literacy might play in it, how the research question is responded to first and foremost depends on how one sees religious education itself. As we have tried to show, this too depends both on wider views about the aims and purposes of education as well as more specific views about religion. We have tried to ‘map’ a range of available positions in relation to all this, in the hope that this research will contribute to the quality of discussions about literacy and religious education.

A final observation: We do think that a convincing case can be made in favour of the idea that education should assist in helping children and young people to become knowledgeable about a wide range of different religious beliefs and practices, on the simple assumption that such beliefs and practices continue to shape contemporary societies. However, although equating this with religious literacy may be relatively uncontentious, it does raise important questions about how different religious beliefs and practices may best be represented as well as how the existential dimension of what it means to live a religious life can be included. Having said this our position, at the close of this stage of the research, is that that such a form of religious literacy would be an appropriate ambition for *all* education rather than being held as the main task for religious education.

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