A RELIGIOUS APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: THE IMPLICATIONS OF JOHN HICK'S RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATION OF RELIGION FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION.

BY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with the question as to how to present the study of religion to students in religious education (RE) in schools that reflects a distinctively *religious* character but not a confessional one. It recognises that how religion is conceptualised in RE and the search for a distinctive rationale that reflects the subject's nature and purpose, has been a contested question over the history of the subject in state maintained schools since the Education Act of 1870. More recently, criticism of what has been termed 'modern liberal RE' has focused on the claim that, in many instances, the subject has misrepresented religion, by being guilty of essentialism and in denying students opportunities to engage with the 'truth claims' of religions.

It is within this context that this thesis argues that a nuanced understanding of John Hick's religious interpretation of religion can positively illuminate these debates by providing a second order explanatory framework for the study of religion in RE.

DEDICATION

Thomas Teece 1913-2004

Margaret Teece 1917-2005

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[1] Teece, G. (2005) Traversing the gap: Andrew Wright, John Hick and critical Religious Education, *British Journal of Religious Education* 27, no. : 29-40.

Maybury, J. and Teece G. (2005) Learning from what? A question of subject focus in religious education in England and Wales, *Journal of Beliefs and Values*. 26, no. 2: 179-190.

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1.   Introduction

The first chapter of this thesis introduces the study, places it in the researcher's own professional context, introduces the philosophical context, addresses some questions about methodology, specifies the research questions and identifies how the thesis sets out to address them. The second chapter summarises the evolution of religious education (RE) in England and provides a reference point for a critical discussion of the self understanding of RE in the third chapter. The fourth chapter presents an overview of the work of John Hick. The fifth chapter presents a critical discussion of Hick's interpretation of religion and suggests aspects of his work that can illuminate discussions about the nature of RE. The sixth and seventh chapters present a critical discussion of how some prominent religious educators have misinterpreted Hick's purported contribution to RE. In the light of the preceding discussion the eighth chapter examines how Hick's religious interpretation of religion can inform and enrich current debates about the nature and purpose of RE. The thesis concludes by making recommendations for both practice and further research in religious education.

1.1   *The nature and motivation of my thesis*

If there is a key philosophical theme within current debates in the literature of religious education then that theme might be expressed in terms of the question, how can religious educators best conceptualise the study of religion in state maintained school religious education in a plural and secular context? (See for example Wright 1993 and 1997; Jackson 1997; Copley (ed.) 1998; Grimmitt 2000; Barnes 2001; O'Grady 2005; Teece 2005; Maybury and Teece 2005; Barnes and Wright 2006; Erricker 2006; Teece 2008). Throughout a successful career teaching religious education in school and higher education, this is the question that has constantly energised me. In this introductory

section to the thesis I attempt to locate this question and its surrounding complexities within the development of my own professional career.

1.1.2 Early professional career and changes in religious education

I graduated with a B.Ed (hons) degree in Theology and Education from the University of Birmingham in 1974 and took up my first teaching post in the autumn as a year 4 primary teacher. As part of my degree I had completed a dissertation on the 'Changing Aims of Religious Education', borrowing the title from Cox (1966). In this dissertation I had analysed how change in three areas had impacted on what Taylor (1986) called the 'intended' curriculum for religious education. The intended curriculum is to be contrasted with the 'operational' curriculum (i.e. what is actually taught and how it is actually taught.)

The influences for change in the intended curriculum for religious education were identified as social, educational and (Christian) theological.

The social change referred to was the increasing plural nature of society, particularly in the big cities, where immigrants, particularly from the Indian sub continent, had settled down, bringing with them their cultural and religious traditions. Potential implications of this developing plurality for religious education had been recognised in the 1966 West Riding Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education, when for the first time a religious education syllabus for England and Wales recognised the presence of students from non Christian faiths in school (West Riding 1966, 104-05).

This formative syllabus also reflected some of the influences that developments in the theory and practice of education were beginning to have on the religious education curriculum, such as increasing knowledge of how children learn (for example, insights gained from Piagetian cognitive stage theory) and an emphasis on 'child centred learning' (Department for Education and Science, 1967).

At the same time Christian theology was responding quite radically to what Bonhoeffer called, 'The World Come of Age', and the influence of theologians such as Bonhoeffer, Bultmann and Tillich was felt in liberal theological circles in the United Kingdom. Such influence was given popular expression by Bishop John Robinson's *Honest to God*; the emphasis being on the need for the Christian tradition to reinterpret itself for the modern inhabitant of an increasingly secular society.

A key concept in education at the time was that of 'readiness'. In the field of religious education Goldman (1965) had written *Readiness for Religion*. This was an educational readiness based on a child's ability to learn and be taught in a way that meets the needs of the learner at different stages of development. Goldman concluded that given what educationalists had learned about a child's cognitive, moral and affective development from such as Piaget and Erikson, religious education syllabuses that were Bible based were often inappropriate because they were not informed by what children could be expected to understand at various stages in their development.

Notwithstanding this, however, if one recognises and accepts the three factors influencing change identified in my dissertation, then perhaps a better concept to describe the tenor of the times is *relevance* (see for example, Loukes 1961)*. Learning had to be relevant in three ways; to the cognitive, moral and affective stage of a child's development; to a child's cultural and religious background and the interests of young people growing up in a rapidly changing, and some would argue (for example see Copley, 1998; 2005) secular society.

All of these factors added together created a tension for approaches to religious education which were reflected in the agreed syllabuses developed before and after the 1944 Education Act and prior to the West Riding syllabus of 1966. Cox listed five presuppositions of these syllabuses, which were still evident at the time that I took up my first teaching post. When I began

teaching in Worcestershire in 1974 local schools were still using the 1936 Cambridge Agreed Syllabus. These presuppositions were;

- that religious instruction (as it was then called) referred to instruction in the Christian scriptures and the history of the Christian church;

- that all children were Christian coming from Christian homes and eager to learn about the Christian faith. There was no suggestion that the Christian perspective on life may be one of a number available to the learner. Hence religious instruction was susceptible to charges of indoctrination;

- that the syllabuses reflected a traditional view of religious truth and faith based on propositional revelation and hence the subject tended to be authoritarian rather than exploratory;

- that the syllabuses view the Bible as the source book of learning about Christianity but take little account of a critical and historical approach to the Bible and

- that the syllabuses take no account of how children might understand material from the Bible differently at different stages.

Taken together these assumptions comprise what many have called confessional religious education. However the term confessional is not as straightforward a term as those either supporting or criticising such an approach have believed it to be. It is important when referring to confessional religious education to unpack its meaning for as Doble (2005, 148) points out the term confess and its cognates can be used adjectivally, or as a verb or a noun; 'a single word doing duty for a number of ideas'. It can, for example refer to an intention to educate in particular way, or it can refer to a kind of world view; for example to 'confess' something to be 'true'. The meaning of

confessional religious education is usually characterised as one of *intention*; that is the intention to 'bring about pupils' commitment to a specific form of religious faith' (Doble 2005, 148). Bearing possible misunderstandings of the term confessional in mind, therefore, Hull's description of such religious education as convergent might be preferred; the idea that the subject involves Christian teachers teaching Christian material to eager Christian youngsters with the expectation that knowledge will be widened and faith deepened.

Rather what the 1974 of my first teaching appointment reflected was a divergent context in which teachers from, potentially, a variety of religious traditions or none were expected to teach religious education to children from, potentially, a variety of faiths or none. This called for a 'new approach'.

In *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion* (1968) Ninian Smart argued that theology, when interpreted narrowly as a closed Christian study, was an inappropriate subject for secular institutions such as the modern university. Instead religious studies, a more naturalistically based discipline, should be the area of study. The Shap Working Party for World Religions was formed in 1969 to promote this form of religious studies in education. Lancaster University, where Smart was professor, became the launch pad for a major Schools Council project in both primary and secondary schools. The secondary project *Journeys into Religion* was based on the phenomenological approach to the study of religion as outlined by Smart.

Nevertheless the most significant development and a pivotal one in the context of my thesis was the publication of the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus in 1975. Cole (1976, 127-128) writing about the importance of the syllabus made two telling points. Firstly, that the 1975 syllabus was the first syllabus of *religious education* produced by a British local education authority (LEA) because education is given precedence over theology (a principle set out in the West Riding Syllabus) but further, it 'has also set its face against the purpose of nurturing children in the Christian faith, and towards enlarging and deepening the pupil's understanding of religion by studying world religions, and by exploring all those elements in human experience which raise

questions about life's ultimate meaning and value'. The second significant point was that the syllabus was more important for its principles than its content: 'Birmingham has produced documents, which are shot through with religious pluralism from beginning to end.' However, how far any principle of pluralism (in a philosophically developed sense rather than merely arguing for the inclusion of non-Christian faiths) affected the syllabus is open to question.

Certainly when I began my teaching career I argued for such a multi-faith approach on the basis of social justice, which was later expressed in the Swann Report (HMSO 1985). I was, in the words of John Hick, an implicit rather than explicit pluralist. Hick (see appendix 1) uses these terms to refer to the common situation for many Christians whereby 'many ordinary church members are implicit pluralists; that is in their actual dealings with their Muslim neighbours and so on and so forth. They don't for a moment think that they ought to be converted or that they are spiritually inferior. They treat them as spiritual and religious or human equals, which implies when you think it out some form of religious pluralism. But it is when you spell it out theologically that it comes as a shock.' It is the spelling out of the possible philosophical/theological implications of these attitudes that can lead one to become an 'explicit' pluralist.

However the syllabus had its critics and of the ones that I read, the most articulate and challenging criticism was provided by Lesslie Newbigin's article *Teaching Religion in a Secular Plural Society* (1977). Essentially the article was an analysis of the possible meanings attached to the three key words of teaching, religion and secularity.

1.1.3 Philosophical context

It was Newbigin's analysis of the term religion and how he understood it to be conceptualised in the Birmingham syllabus that posed the most significant challenge to me as a young teacher beginning a career as a specialist in religious education.

Newbigin (1977, 99) claims that the syllabus, and by extension all modern phenomenological approaches to religious education, rests upon a particular view in which religions should be regarded. No one religion is to be regarded as superior to the rest and the religions should be studied 'objectively and for their own sake'. Newbigin's claim was that if 'objectivity' in the sense being used by the syllabus meant without any presuppositions about what counts as evidence and what makes sense then it is impossible. If, however, it does not mean this then the stance that the syllabus takes towards how religion(s) should be studied is hidden from view.

Clearly this is unacceptable to Newbigin and other critics who believe that religion is an ultimate commitment to the truth and not, as one of a class of religions each with their own particular ways of understanding ultimate reality. Thus if a particular stance towards how religion is to be studied is being adopted in religious education then it needs arguing as to what is to count as evidence for that particular way of understanding religion in RE. Why for example, is it better to study Christianity as one religion amongst others, each with a legitimate claim to truth than studying it as the truth?

It could be pointed out at this juncture that the Birmingham agreed syllabus was designed for state maintained schools in a plural city and that the approach taken by the syllabus was the only acceptable one on grounds of fairness and social justice and that this was sufficient justification for the adopted approach.

However, for me as a young reflective teacher, it was Newbigin's essential point about teaching added to his argument that a particular way of understanding religion in religious education must be argued for that presented the challenge that has driven my reflections for thirty years and resulted in this thesis.

He makes the point that teachers of history or science for example are not concerned merely with students exploring how various theories understand

what the truth in each discipline is but ultimately with what is actually the truth in each discipline. This is not an argument for indoctrination for a teacher of each of these disciplines would want a student to grasp for themselves what really is the case not just an appreciation of the various ways of looking at it. It is not intended either that students adopt a fixed position but one that is always open to change on the basis of new knowledge and self reflection; that students develop appropriate critical faculties in the field of study. Hence ' religious education is self defeating if it is only concerned with 'the religious dimension of human experience' and not with the realities which religious experience tries to grasp and respond to' (Newbigin 1977, 105).

However, Smart, whose work had heavily influenced the syllabus, recognised this (Smart, 1968, 12). He argued that in studying the various dimensions of religion students should be engaged with studying the phenomena of religion in the light of the 'parahistorical truth claims' of the traditions; that religious education should 'transcend the informative'. He made the following distinction: 'We can consider religious phenomena and beliefs from a purely historical and descriptive point of view on the one hand; and we can approach them as relevant to, or as enshrining, claims about the nature of reality.' He refers to the former as historical and the latter as parahistorical. He prefers the term parahistorical to 'doctrinal' because the doctrinal only represents one dimension of religion. The parahistorical refers to;

> cases of commending the faith, of arguing for its truth, of endorsing religious values etc., and cases of doing the reverse (as when one may criticise the faith as untrue, or dangerous, or decadent, or pernicious, or nonsensical etc) (Smart 1968, 13).

So a balanced RE curriculum will involve an interaction between the historical and parahistorical.

Notwithstanding this however, my questions after reading Newbigin's article were how can this best be achieved and why, necessarily, would following the

Birmingham Agreed Syllabus not enable the intended curriculum to be effectively operationalised?

1.1.4 The professional dilemma and philosophical questions as evidenced in my later professional context

If students are to engage with the parahistorical truth claims of religion from what basis are they to engage? Merely to present them with different and possible claims to truth is to give them no criteria from which to operate their critical faculties. Furthermore as each religion makes different claims to truth what understanding of religion is appropriate from which we might devise some appropriate criteria?

For a number of years I was living uneasily with these questions. I was also concerned to be the best possible teacher of religious education that I could be. I had become head of department in a new school. The chair of governors at this school was sceptical about the claims I was making for a multi faith approach to the subject in a white Anglo Saxon school where most students were from either Christian or non religious homes. To him the argument for mutual understanding, tolerance and appreciation of various religious viewpoints held no water. Furthermore this was a church, albeit church controlled, school. Despite the distinction made in legislation between the curriculum in RE and Collective worship as it applied to a controlled school, my role as head of RE was seen as important in bringing a distinctively religious dimension to the life of the school and its curriculum. I was forced to articulate what was distinctive about an approach to RE that appeared to my critics to undermine the distinctively religious view of life that a Christian approach to the subject would bring.

I continued to live uneasily with these questions and when the opportunity arose in 1984 to obtain a term's secondment to study at the RE Centre (Midlands) based at Westhill College I seized it. The staff at the Centre, Director Garth Read, along with John Rudge and Roger Howarth were

beginning work on the Westhill Project, an ambitious project for teaching multi faith RE to students aged 5-16 years. I worked for a term on this project, the most inspirational aspect of which was being taught by Garth Read.

It was from Garth that I gained insights into a view of religious education that I had only faintly grasped before; one that understood the key overarching question of the subject as being what does it mean to be human? It directed my attention away from the idea that religious education was about studying religions *per se* to a view that understood the place of the religions in the process of teaching and learning as instrumental. In other words the religious traditions provide students with particular views of what it means to be human and thus contributes to their own developing individual patterns of belief and values. But this did not mean, in Newbigin's terminology merely surveying what such views were but how such views were related to a more general shared human experience, which understood human beings as being inexorably concerned with what Fowler (1981), described as constructing an 'ultimate environment'.

The other key experience of this secondment was the opportunity to take part in visits to places of worship. This was an activity that had been developed by Roger Howarth when he was appointed to the RE Centre in 1980. It enabled me to visit Hindu mandirs, Sikh gurdwaras, Jewish synagogues, Muslim mosques, Buddhist centres and a variety of Christian places of worship. This was something that I had never had the opportunity to do before and it had an enormous impact on me. This experience coupled with discussions and lectures with Garth enabled me to view these different religious communities as being different expressions of how each community understood what was most valuable, most important, most holy in life. It seemed to me that this was what the subject of religious education ought to be about.

On returning to school I was more concerned with designing practical ways of enabling my students to understand religions in the process of constructing their own ultimate environments than on the philosophical and theological implications of this approach.

Having been so inspired by my brief flirtation with Birmingham and the RE Centre, I decided I needed to maximise my potential for career development outside of school teaching, possibly entering Higher Education. So I applied for and obtained a year's secondment in 1986-87 to study for a Masters in Education degree at Birmingham University. Partly due to Garth Read's influence I decided not to study Theology but Curriculum Studies with Professor Philip Taylor and Philosophy of Education with Professor Robert Dearden. This choice of subjects was heavily influenced by my time at the RE Centre, for they were two courses provided as part of a Diploma in RE offered to serving teachers by the Centre. My thinking was that if ever a post came up at the Centre this qualification might make me more eligible!

However, perhaps, the most significant event in my year's secondment was attendance at a public lecture by religious education HMI Alan Loosemore. As far as I remember it was a lecture on the current state of religious education in England and Wales. What I do remember clearly, however, is a question by one of my philosophy teachers Mike Degenhardt. He asked, what are you advocating, teaching about religion or teaching religion? Loosemore, disappointingly, avoided the question but for me it seemed like a crucial one to answer. It immediately sent me back to my previous philosophical problems with the subject. For if the answer had been 'teaching about religion', then a further question might have been, in what way can teaching about religion enable religious education to have an identity that made it distinctive from, for example, sociology or anthropology? If the answer had been 'teaching religion', then the question could have been how is teaching religion in school different from teaching religion in the Sunday school or madrassah? As it was I was left to reflect on these questions alone.

I returned to school having obtained my masters degree but soon after applied for and was appointed to work at the RE Centre.

It was during my first year at the centre, which allowed me more time to read and reflect that I came upon three writers who would radically influence my thinking.

The first was an American religious educator, Gabriel Moran. In *Religious Education as a Second Language* (1989) Moran devoted a chapter to religious education in England and Wales. Whilst complimentary about the pioneering work done over here, especially by Grimmitt, he (1989, 99-100) identified two significant problems with the way that religious education was being conceptualised. Firstly there was a problem with language. The term religious education, when used to describe an academic subject, makes 'little logical sense and obstructs a wider discussion of RE still needed in the UK'. He stated that British religious educators seemed unaware of this problem; that it is a strange use of language to make religious education the object of the act of teaching. So RE instead of comprising worship and religious instruction as in the 1944 Education Act had in 1988 become a name of a curriculum subject. He contrasts this usage with the notion of religious education being an involvement in a lifelong process, which in school can involve the literature teacher, the history teacher etc. Instead our language has meant that every other teacher, apart from the RE teacher, is outside religious education. I thought at the time that this was a forceful argument that went some way towards addressing Newbigin's point when he contrasted the teaching of history and science with what he understood as being recommended in the Birmingham syllabus. However, whilst recognising the force of the argument, the reality of the situation is that we do have a discreet subject called religious education and I regarded it as important that those who value it are able to argue a case for its *distinctiveness* in an over crowded school timetable. It was this issue of distinctiveness that was now forcing itself to the forefront of my thinking.

Nevertheless there is the possibility of claiming too much for one curriculum subject and also being unclear as to what it is this curriculum subject is actually about. Moran put these problems down to what he saw as the bifurcation of thought in the west deriving from the enlightenment; a point that

echoes one made strongly by Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1981). Such bifurcation has led to unhelpful opposites such as objectivity and subjectivity, religion and science. So should religious education be objective or confessional? Should it take its place on the outside or the inside of religion? Are you a believer or a non- - believer? Thus, according to Moran (1989, 103) we lack an agreed upon language that can guide us safely through this 'universe of unbridgeable gaps'.

Secondly (1989, 218-211) he noted that, 'religious education has to do with the religious life of the human race and bringing people within the influence of that life. The word 'education' indicates some restraints on how that influence is exercised'. And consequently, 'intellectual criticism can be introduced gently, but it should start about five minutes after the child's school career begins'. In describing this process Moran pointed out two unacceptable polarities; the first one is the inappropriateness of proselytising and indoctrinating and the second one is merely presenting explanations of religion, by which he meant religion as described by the naturalistic disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology etc. He did not view such disciplines negatively but stated that people who work in such fields do not regard themselves as religious educators.

Hence it occurred to me that the reality which I had been wrestling with was that religion was being understood in religious education either 'religiously' but only from perspectives within one tradition, as in the type of religious education advocated in the post 1944 agreed syllabuses, or 'objectively and dispassionately' (Smart 1971, 12) as understood in modern phenomenological approaches. The problem with the former approach was that a theological perspective from one tradition could not do justice to other traditions and hence was rejected in the developments from the 1970s onwards. The problem with the latter was at the time, for me, not so much that phenomenological RE often resulted in banal descriptive pedagogies but that an 'objective and dispassionate' interpretation of religion could result in *religious education* not only losing its 'confessional' identity but failing to develop a new *distinctive* identity. For what was there to distinguish it from

sociology or history? The issue, as I now know, of course, is that much of these concerns are to do with how Smart's intentions for an understanding of religion and religious education were interpreted in later developments of his work in a bland naturalistic way that did not and often does not allow pupils to get to grips with something distinctive about a religious viewpoint on the world.

It wasn't so much the philosophy of education that was missing from academic discussion of religious education but a philosophy of religion, sufficiently robustly argued.

So would it be possible to reclaim something of Smart's intentions by looking at other complementary approaches to the study of religion?

My answer is yes and firstly and partly in the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith. In my early days at the RE Centre I read both his *Meaning and End of Religion* (1978) and *Towards a World Theology* (1981). Whilst not providing a philosophy of religion as such these two books did provide valuable insights into the nature of religion as Smith saw it. His critique of the western post enlightenment tendency to systemise and reify living religion into abstract systems of belief is a lesson that has had a big impact in recent approaches to religious education through the work of Robert Jackson (1997).

However there was also something in Smith's work that rang bells for me in seeking to bring together my practical human development approaches to religious education in the classroom and my philosophical questions about how religion is to be understood in this process. Smith argued that labels such as Hinduism and Buddhism and even Christianity were essentially inventions of western modernism; that most Hindus didn't refer to their religious life as Hinduism but *Sanatana Dharma* (the eternal way) or that Buddhists referred not to Buddhism but the *dhamma*. Smith's argument was that religion for many people enabled them to interpret their life and the world around them through the teachings and practices of their tradition. What we in the west referred to as religion was better understood as people living lives of faith

within a cumulative tradition; that faith was not synonymous with belief (as meaning adhering to a set of propositions about the world) but a particular orientation to the world around them. As James Fowler noted (1981, 13-14): 'Many modern Westerners when encountering someone from another religious tradition are likely to ask, what do you (they) 'believe? as if that were the key question.' Rather the questions should be: 'On what or whom do you set your heart? To what vision of right -relatedness between humans, nature and the transcendent are you loyal? What hope and what ground of hope animate you and give shape to the force field of your life and how you move into it?' [2]

Such questions seemed to me to be better equipped to enable students to understand the relevance of religious life to the question of, what it means to be human, than merely enquiring into what are the beliefs of particular religious traditions. For as Smith (1978, 138) points out: 'It is what the Hindu is able to see, by being a Hindu that is significant. Until we can see it too, we have not come to grips with the religious quality of his life. And we can be sure that when he looks around him he does not see 'Hinduism'. Like the rest of us, he sees his wife's death, his child's minor and major aspirations, his moneylender's mercilessness, the calm of a starlight evening, his own mortality. He sees things through coloured glasses, if one will, of a 'Hindu' brand.'

It seemed to me that this was such an interesting way to view the phenomena of religion that not only presented religion in a way in which most religious believers understood their lives, but would enable students to engage with religion in a way that made sense to them when considering life questions for themselves.

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[2] Interestingly such insights inform the most recent publication by the popular religious commentator Karen Armstrong (2009) who argues that religion should be understood in this way within the current debates in the media fuelled by what has become known as the 'new atheism'. This understanding of faith and belief has also been argued by the Marxist academic Terry Eagleton (2009, 111). By emphasising 'belief' religions, and atheists alike, have, according to Armstrong, locked the current public debate and religion itself into a religious cul-de-sac.

However, bearing Newbigin's challenge in mind, from where could I construct a philosophical argument that justified this way of understanding religion in RE as opposed to, for example, the more modernist Christian/Western view that understands religious faith as assent to a series of propositional, revelatory beliefs?

In 1989 John Hick's Gifford Lectures were published as *An Interpretation of Religion*. It was the subtitle *Human Responses to the Transcendent* that caused me to pick the book off the shelf of new editions in the RE Centre. I opened the book and read the first paragraph:

> There are many general interpretations of religion. These have usually been either naturalistic, treating religion as a purely human phenomenon or, if religious, have been developed within the confines of a particular confessional conviction which construes all other traditions in its own terms. The one type of theory that has seldom been attempted is a religious but not confessional interpretation of religion in its plurality of forms; and it is this that I shall be trying to offer here (Hick 1989, 1).

This immediately seemed to me to describe the dilemma that I had been grappling with ever since first reading Newbigin's article. Religious education in England and Wales had originally been based on a confessional Christian interpretation of religion. By the 1960s this was seen as inappropriate by many and was replaced, as noted above, in the 1970s by an objective and dispassionate interpretation understood as the phenomenological approach. So here was the task so clearly articulated by Hick. Was it possible to outline a religious interpretation to a multi faith approach based on religion being interpreted as 'human responses to the transcendent' and could such an interpretation better present the phenomena of religion in a way that made better sense than other approaches to a religious education that was relevant to young people's questions about life and the world around them?

Therefore I decided to focus this study on the work of Hick and investigate whether his 'religious theory of religion' could make a positive contribution towards articulating a really *distinctive* character for the modern multi faith subject of religious education.

1.2 Methodology:

1.2.1 Problems with research methodology in philosophy of education.

This is a philosophical study in the field of religious education. However, it is also a thesis written for the award of PhD located in a university school of education. As Ruitenberg (2009, 315) points out: 'The work of philosophers of education and philosophers more generally has not been without method, but this has not commonly been taught under the term 'research methods.' She also points out (2009, 316) that research methods courses are uncommon in departments of philosophy where it is assumed that students learn to read and write philosophy by, 'well, reading and writing philosophy'. However education is nowadays usually seen as a social science and most research in schools of education is empirically based with an emphasis on data gathering and data analysis. In such an environment it could be argued that 'the question of method in philosophy is a vexed one' (Standish 2009, i). As Paul Standish writes:

> Empirical research into education constructs its research questions and then determines the best means to find answers to them; and sometimes the methods that are available, or those in which the researcher is adept, determine the kinds of questions that can be asked. In philosophy too there can be this fit, and sometimes philosophy is none the worse for this. But one does not go far in philosophy without realising that one has embarked on an on-going engagement with the literature, and the consequences of this are multiple: the presuppositions one brings to the enquiry are challenged,

the questions with which one starts change their shape and whatever one might have thought of as one's method becomes caught up in one's research interest. Sometimes content and method are one (Standish 2009, i).

How, therefore, does a philosopher of education articulate his research methods without submitting to the paradigms of the social sciences' emphasis on data collection and analysis?

As Holma (2009, 327) points out: 'Before reaching the point of exact philosophical analysis on a particular theme, there are many significant choices the researcher must make first. The choices related to the topic, perspective and demarcation and limitation are decisive for successful philosophical research and this should be made by a process of conscious reflection.' She also points out (2009, 336) that the way a philosopher discusses and argues within a topic may not normally require explication, particularly amongst those familiar with the subject but I, like she, think it appropriate to make explicit how I have conducted my research.

1.2.2 How I went about it

In deciding to base this study on the work of John Hick, several methodological problems presented themselves. Firstly as a theologian *and* philosopher of religion Hick's work has ranged over a great variety of subjects and in so doing has given rise to a huge volume of critical discussion; more that one hundred and thirty journal articles and more than a hundred books ranging from a few pages to a chapter to whole books (Hick 2004, xvii).

However, all such discussion hitherto relates to the presentation and criticism of Hick's work in the fields of theology and the philosophy of religion. This present discussion is located in the field of religious education and as far as I am aware nobody has undertaken a systematic study of John Hick's work in relation to religious education in schools. Although there has been occasional

critical discussion of Hick's purported influence on modern day theory and practice in religious education, this can be described as *ahistorical* based not on what Hick has written about religious education but on perspectives and arguments located within the fields of theology and the philosophy of religion. This may, of course be appropriate for a study based in those disciplines but apart from one contribution to Bates et al (2006) Hick has not written anything in the field of religious education. In the 1970s he was Chair of the Steering Committee that oversaw the development of the 1975 Birmingham Agreed Syllabus but as he notes it was not he but John Hull who was a major force in syllabus development. As he writes (Hick 2002, 166): 'He knew, needless to say, far more than me about religious education and its problems.' In the same passage Hick also notes that the work of Ninian Smart and the SHAP working part on world religions in education led the way in influencing the development of the syllabus.

Therefore the intention of this study is to take a philosophical approach to questions about the nature and purpose of RE based on analysis firmly located in a historical context. This context is the development of religious education from the early 1970s until the present day. It will therefore necessitate as part of the analysis, a quasi- historical document search. In addition to this it is important to read Hick's texts primarily with the aim of 'understanding the author's thinking as such' (Holma 2009, 327): there are a number of examples, in both theology and religious education, where a critic of Hick has either relied heavily on secondary sources rather than the primary source of Hick's work itself (See for example Ratzinger 1996) or failed to give a comprehensive and fair account of Hick's work because the critic has been selective in the use of texts on which to base the criticism (See for example, Cooling 1993). Consequently I set myself the task of reading the whole of Hick's output as it is clearly developmental and to concentrate on one or two particular texts would run the risk of misrepresenting his mature arguments. Hence it was important to understand Hick's work within its own terms of reference. This not only involved paying close attention to the text but also regular contact and communication with Hick himself (See for example appendix 1).

In addition to exploring the work of Hick *per se* the study also aims to comment upon and make recommendations about the RE curriculum. Consequently I decided that any philosophical discussion of Hick's work and his critics in religious education must be based on historical documents and curriculum development in religious education over the last forty years.

Without reading Hick's work as a whole and without assessing it within the historical context of developments within religious education, any critical appraisal would risk falling prey to the adoption of 'narrow perspectives and ahistorical epistemologies that take present day understandings of RE for granted' (Freathy and Parker 2009).

In taking these points seriously it becomes obvious that (1) Hick's work needs to be understood within its own terms of reference if criticism is to be appraised honestly and a fair assessment made of his potential contribution to religious education and (2) that the thrust of the work should be seen as an opening of a discussion where the validity of the philosophical points made are related to the wider context of theory and practice in religious education and the possible practical implications in what has been explored (See Holma 2009, 334).

Therefore in registering to study for a PhD I constructed the following research questions and hypotheses.

1.3　Research questions and hypotheses

Proposed title for the thesis: A religious approach to religious education: the implications of John Hick's interpretation of religion for religious education.

Overall Research Question

To what extent might John Hicks 'religious' interpretation of religion contribute to a new understanding of the distinctive character of modern multi faith religious education?

Research question 1:　　What is the current self understanding of religious education?

Hypothesis:　Since the abandonment of what has come to be known as 'confessional' religious education, religious educators have largely followed the paradigm established in the 1970s which was informed by liberal Christian theology and phenomenology. This paradigm owed much to the work of Ninian Smart who was Professor of Religious Studies in the University of Lancaster. The 'Lancaster Project' resulted in a number of influential publications through the Schools Council. Such influence can be seen in agreed syllabuses published from the mid 1970s onwards, in classroom practice and as the foundation of current debates within the religious education literature today.

It might be argued that such debates have moved beyond the phenomenological approach after finding a variety of flaws within it. So for example, Wright's dismissal of the approach in 1993 as being paternalistic, Barnes' various writings outlining what he believes is wrong with the approach (See for example, Barnes 2001; 2007: 2009) could be said to have moved the debate forward to concentrate on what Wright originally called 'religious literacy' based on a critical realist approach to the subject; he has more recently described his approach as 'critical religious education' (Wright 2007).

Recently, Barnes (2007) has outlined the bare bones of a 'post-liberal' approach. Furthermore Jackson (1997) explored the limitations of a phenomenological approach that tended towards the reification of religions and outlined his 'interpretive approach.' Indeed some of the most interesting recent debates have been between Wright and Jackson, where the central question remains, namely 'how far does any approach to religious education, enable students to engage with, in the words of Wright (2007, 198) 'a rigorous pursuit of truth'. In addition to these debates there have been developments by both Erricker (2000) and Grimmitt (2000, 207-227) of a 'constructivist' approach. It might, therefore, be stretching credulity to make the claim that such debates revolve around a critical discussion of the limitations of the phenomenological model.

However, as Michael Grimmitt (2000, 26) has pointed out: 'With hindsight it is now possible to see that the problems of attempting to reconcile the phenomenological and experiential approaches within an integrated pedagogical model of RE has proved to be the stimulus for the development of nearly all other pedagogical models of RE for the last twenty five years.' So despite the developments in current debates about religious education, briefly mentioned above, it can be argued that ever since the advent of the Schools Council Working Paper (Schools Council 1971) and up to the present day, religious educators have been concerned, in Grimmitt's words with the interaction of the 'life worlds' of students and content derived from the religious traditions (See Grimmitt 1987 and 2000, 24-52).

It is the content derived from religious traditions that has become a live and contested question in RE and one to which this thesis intends to provide a fresh perspective.

Which leads to research question two.

Research question 2: Why might this understanding need refining/enriching?

Hypothesis: The concern here is that leading critics of the phenomenological approach, whilst making reasonable criticisms of some poor examples in the development of it since its recommendation in the early 1970s (See Jackson 1997), have made assumptions about the work of its originator in UK schools, Ninian Smart, which do not stand up to scrutiny. Indeed one of those original critics, Andrew Wright, has recently admitted to misrepresenting Smart (Wright 2007, 87). In recommending a 'critical' approach Wright has stated that the *Non-Statutory Framework for Religious Education* (QCA 2004) presents 'an agenda close to' his own approach and that it 'reflects Smart's initial vision of the task of liberal religious education' (Wright 2007, 87).

It may be true that 'too many educators have operated with an unduly optimistic interpretation of the history of religious education, according to which advances follow sequentially and rationally' (Barnes and Wright 2006: 66). Nevertheless whilst 'assumptions need to be challenged in the interests of clarity and good sense' it can also be argued that recent critics have run the risk, as can be seen, for example, in Penny Thompson's book *Whatever Happened to Religious Education* of ' misleading the innocents' (Gates 2005, 86). So religious educators who are not careful readers of Smart's original work may be misled in attributing greater authority to his critics than they deserve.

Thus it is the contention of this hypothesis that the original formulation of a phenomenological approach to religious education by Ninian Smart is not guilty of some of the flaws identified, in particular, by Barnes, and whilst it is no doubt true that in some cases religious educators have had an unduly optimistic view of the potential of the subject, the perceived optimism surrounding phenomenological religious education from the 1970s onwards is now in danger of being replaced by an overwhelming pessimism, to such a degree that nothing good can seemingly be found within it.

However this is not to say that the established phenomenological approach cannot be refined and enriched in order to counter some of the longstanding criticisms of it and to help teachers to understand and work with a potentially more enriching and 'religious' interpretation of religion in religious education. Most criticisms of the phenomenological approach centre around its understanding of religion. Both Barnes and Wright believe that this is not reflective of the lives and beliefs of religious adherents. However, both argue from a conservative Christian position and their account of what counts as 'genuine' religion has not been sufficiently robustly challenged. When faced with a supposed 'liberal' like Hick, they misrepresent him as a universalising romantic in the tradition of Schleiermacher. Not only is this not true but the alternative 'story' needs to be told.

Which leads to research question three.

Research Question 3: How might John Hick's religious interpretation of religion contribute to a new understanding?

Hypothesis: The reason that I have chosen Hick to form the basis of the alternative 'story', mentioned above, is that (1) his pluralist hypothesis is the most famous and widely discussed theory of its type, and (2) it is often assumed in the religious education literature that this has influenced modern multi faith religious education; particularly by those who find fault with it. It can also be shown (as mentioned in the short discussion on methodology, above) that there are a number of examples, in both theology and religious education where critics of Hick have either misunderstood or misrepresented him, usually because of being very selective in their reading of him (See for example Ratzinger 1996 and Cooling 1993). Therefore if Hick's religious interpretation of religion is to be fairly assessed for its potential contribution to a revised or enriched understanding of religious education, several things need to be addressed.

(1)   His work needs to be read as a whole.

Up until now nobody has written in favour of Hick's work as having the potential to inform the theory and practice of multi faith religious education. Despite the fact that there is overwhelming evidence of Hick's influence in theology and philosophy of religion there is little evidence of his influence in religious education. Many of those who have written about Hick have tended to have a negative view of his work and have criticised his pluralist hypothesis as one that leads to a misinterpretation of religion. It is the contention of this hypothesis that no fair and balanced critique of Hick's work can be achieved unless his work is read as a whole. Therefore before holding Hick's interpretation of religion up to critical scrutiny it is essential to present an overview of his work and trace some epistemological and thematic consistencies that are evident throughout it from his interpretation of Christian faith in *Faith and Knowledge* (1957) up to his *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989).

(2)   Hick's religious interpretation of religion needs to stand up to critical scrutiny.

The most interesting themes in Hick's work, and arguably the most enduring, are (1) faith as a total interpretation of experience, 'experiencing as'; (2) his 'Irenaean theodicy; 3) his 'religious' interpretation of religion (religion as human transformation in response to a transcendent reality); and (4) his pluralist hypothesis. Following on from the statement that Hick's work needs to be read in its entirety, it is evident that none of these four elements can be critically scrutinised without reference to the others; that there is an epistemological and thematic consistency in his work. Bearing this in mind it will be argued that Hick's interpretation of religion *as human transformation in response (consciously or unconsciously) to a transcendent reality* stands up to critical scrutiny as a second order interpretative framework of religion.

(2)   Hick's interpretation of religion needs to be presented fairly and accurately in religious education literature.

Hick (Bates et al. 2006, 62) has said: 'I am not an authority on religious education in schools.' Whilst this is true and the potential of Hick's philosophy of religion has not been adequately explored in religious education literature, critics have made a variety of misleading assumptions about Hick's involvement and interest in religious education. So in this sense it can be said that Hick's work *has* been considered but found wanting. There are two elements to this. The narrower element is that it is possible to identify certain assumptions about Hick's purported influence on religious education leading from his involvement in the 1975 Birmingham Agreed Syllabus for RE, for which he was Chair of the Steering Committee that oversaw the development of the syllabus. Some criticisms of that syllabus have made oblique reference to Hick but it is a misunderstanding to associate Hick's philosophy with the stance of this syllabus. On the contrary, as evidenced in his autobiography, Hick was motivated by concern for children of non-Christian faiths and 'ways of catering for them within the existing legal framework' (Hick 2002, 162). So his concerns were about social justice, equality of provision for all children in a multi-faith city like Birmingham, and a 'genuinely educational' approach to the subject (Hick 2002, 163). In fact the stance of the syllabus had much more to do with the contemporary influence of Ninian Smart's phenomenological approach to RE as expounded in Schools Council Working Paper 36 and the Shap working party on World Religions (Hick 2002, 166).

The second element is that some religious educators in more recent times have written critically of Hick which involves a wider dimension, evident in the religious education literature, where writers have been critical of an assumed influence of Hick on multi faith religious education *per se*. It is therefore important to clarify why such critics have a negative approach to Hick's work and to assess whether or not this is warranted. The reason for such negativity is that critics have concentrated on his pluralist hypothesis as the starting point for a critical discussion of his interpretation of religion. It has already been argued that in order to form a fair and balanced critique of Hick then his work should be considered as a whole. It is not evident that this has been the case in the religious education literature, so in expressing a disagreement

with a pluralist approach to religion critics of Hick have misinterpreted him as a liberal relativist in the romantic theological tradition of Schleiermacher, and as recommending a universalising religious faith based on a common religious experience. This hypothesis argues that all these accusations are in fact false and cannot be substantiated. They distort the integrity of Hick's work as a whole and negate his potential contribution to RE.

Which leads to research question four

Research question 4: What are the implications of applying Hick's second order explanatory framework of religion as human transformation in response to a transcendent reality for religious education?

Hypothesis: Given that there are issues to be resolved in the debate about phenomenological religious education it is the contention of this hypothesis that Hick's interpretation of religion can make a *distinctive* contribution to enriching the phenomenological approach. Given that 'religion' is one of the central concepts within the field of religious education, it is a remarkably elusive concept that permits neither a simple nor a single definition. Indeed there are many ways to study religion and there are many different definitions of religion. Following Smart, in the professional world of religious education the study of religion has been firmly located in the move away from a theological approach to a multi-disciplinary and multi-dimensional approach as understood by the discipline of religious studies. So religion can be studied from an historical, sociological or psychological point of view, for example. Whilst many religious educators today will not see a problem with this, it is evident that Smart's concern to move away from theology in conceptualising the study of religion in secular institutions has unintentionally led to a philosophical vacuum that requires filling by a clear philosophy of religion, which is where Hick's thought can make a distinctive contribution. For example, if the kind of Christian education that predated modern approaches to the subject attempted to enable students to understand the world from a Christian point of view, what is it to understand the world from a broadly religious point of view?

This is a question worth asking because if there is something distinctive about a religious view of experience, our pupils should be enabled to understand it. But how does one conceptualise this? This is where Hick's religious, as opposed to confessional or naturalistic, interpretation can provide religious educator's with useful insights.

Having argued that Hick's religious interpretation of religion stands up to critical scrutiny as a second order interpretative framework it is the contention of this thesis that such a framework can positively inform religious educators' understanding of the often debated and misunderstood terms of learning about and from religion as liberally used in RE syllabuses. In so doing Hick's work forms a revisionist approach to the established paradigm of Smartian phenomenology. It is not the intention to replace phenomenological study of religion but to offer, in the light of recent criticism, some new insights into how the established pattern of thinking about multi-faith RE might be enhanced and made appropriate to a subject that, in my opinion, is looking for fresh insights into how it might make a distinctive contribution to the 21st century curriculum in schools.

2:   Religious Education in England

2.1   *The evolution of religious education in England*

The aim of this section is to present a brief, selected, historical overview of the evolution of religious education in state maintained schools in England. It is presented as a reference point for the reader to which much of the philosophical discussion that follows is related.

'The development of religious education in community schools, and also the provision of state funded schools with a religious character, has been evolutionary' (DCSF 2010, 20). Such an evolution begins with the Education Act 1870 (See Murphy 1972). During the period from 1870 to the present day religious education has evolved to meet and reflect political, educational, theological and social changes. Significant social changes such as increasing secularity and plurality (See for example DCSF 2010, 15; Copley 2008) are fundamental influences in the way that RE has developed over time. Consequently there are various ways that one might present an overview of these changes; for example one could present the evolution by examining the various Education Acts and how they have impacted on the subject's development. I have not chosen this option. As this is a philosophical study dealing with the nature and purpose of the subject, I have chosen to look at the aims of RE as expressed in Agreed Syllabuses, and more recently, 'official' national documents. Set out below are some examples from key documents over this time.

2.2   Towards the 1944 Education Act

The Cambridgeshire Agreed Syllabus 1939

> A classroom cannot be a purely secular place so long as the school
> remains aware of its *raison d'être* as a microcosm of the kingdom of God.
> And if by 'the Church' we mean the living body of believers in a world that
> is hungry for some Word proceeding out of the mouth of God, the work of
> the schools will be to the edifying of the Church, which is the Body of
> Christ (Cambridgeshire and Isle of Ely 1939, 7).

Cambridgeshire local education authority produced an agreed syllabus as early as 1924. At the time it was very influential. It was, also, very much a product of its time in both content and purpose. In terms of content it was biblical and the purpose of teaching is described in the passage quoted above. In the introduction to the handbook, which was written to accompany the syllabus, it says:

> The Gospels were the manuals of preacher and teacher in carrying their
> message from one land to another and from one generation to the next. Our
> business in religious teaching is the same (Yeaxlee 1940, 10).

The Handbook recognises the force of the Cowper Temple Clause of 1870 which stated that 'no religious catechism or religious formulary which is distinctive of any denomination shall be taught in the school' (Murphy 1972, 61) in terms of denominational teaching and thus seeks to avoid denominational controversy, but the assumption is confessional; albeit a broadly based one. In other words agreed syllabuses at the time were expressly designed to deal with Judaeo-Christian plurality and the Bible was shared territory. Being a biblically based syllabus it is fair to say that its focus was on the past. Early syllabuses were, largely, syllabuses for scripture lessons. The intention of such lessons was the nurturing of pupils' spiritual lives within the context of a common Christian heritage. Such intentions were clearly expressed in the Surrey syllabus of 1945.

The aim of the Syllabus is to secure that children attending the schools of the County….may gain knowledge of the common Christian faith held by their fathers for nearly 2,000 years; may seek for themselves in Christianity principles which give a purpose to life and a guide to all its problems; and may find inspiration, power and courage to work for their own welfare, for that of their fellow creatures, and for the growth of God's kingdom.

These two examples reflected the essential nature of agreed syllabuses until the 1960s.

2.3   The West Riding Agreed Syllabus 1966

The single most significant factor on syllabuses of the 1960s was the influence on education in general of cognitive stage development theory, particularly the work of Jean Piaget. As far as RE was concerned, Piaget's work formed the theoretical foundation of the research of Ronald Goldman's *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence* (1964) and *Readiness for Religion* (1965). The second title was very characteristic of the period, which saw the word 'readiness' figure in the titles in other subject areas, for example Readiness for Reading. This general educational debate found its way into the consciousness of Agreed Syllabus Conferences in the 1960s. The most influential of the time was the syllabus produced by the West Riding of Yorkshire. Published in 1966, this syllabus took seriously the work of people like Goldman. In a section on the underlying principles of the syllabus (West Riding 1966, 2) it is written: 'The material in the syllabus must be related to life and experience. An attempt has been made to introduce reality and relevance into all sections of the syllabus.' Consequently the syllabus develops a thematic approach, especially in the early years of schooling. The syllabus remains confessionally Christian in that one of its stated aims on page six is: 'One of the aims of religious education … is to see that whether they accept or reject Christianity, young people have at first understood what it is all about. Essentially they need help in their personal relationships, and as these deepen they need to see that Christian love concerns the whole person.' In truth the approach can be more accurately described as experiential religious education

(See Hull 1982, 135-148). This approach, which was developed at Westhill College, Birmingham by Ronald Goldman and Douglas Hubery, sought to relate the ordinary experience of children to the Bible. The approach also became known as the 'life theme approach', although strictly speaking the life theme approach differed from experiential RE in that it emphasised that human experience, as well as the Biblical material, was worth studying in its own right. Apart from the relevance aspect, this syllabus reflected a growing awareness amongst syllabus compliers of non-Christian religions (104-105). This would be described as tokenism today but it is an early indication of a growing awareness of the existence of children in schools from non-Christian backgrounds.

2.4   Implicit and explicit RE and the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus 1975

The syllabus should be used to enlarge and deepen children's understanding of religion by studying world religions and by exploring all those elements of human experience which raise questions about life's ultimate meaning and value (Birmingham 1975, 4).

Due to influences from Christian theology as well as an increasing presence in society of people from other countries, there grew up in the 1970s a distinction between, what has been called, implicit RE and explicit RE. Implicit RE (Schools Council 1971), which became popular in primary schools, concerned itself with children's own experiences, feelings, emotions and insights, especially in terms of relationships. By concentrating on these things it was hoped that children would become sensitive towards and ask questions about human experience understood at depth. This notion was discussed at length by a number of theologians, especially Tillich (1962) but was perhaps most clearly expressed by Jeffreys (1950, 158) who said that 'religious experience is not a strange and uncanny sort of experience but is normal experience understood at full depth'. The implicit approach would encourage children to consider general concepts such as love, care and honesty, usually through thematic work such as 'Homes' and 'Families'. Unlike the experiential approach, the introduction of religious or biblical material

was not deemed to be necessary. To explore these human experience concepts at depth was enough for such an approach to count as religious.

The explicit approach concentrated on religion as an observable phenomenon in the world. It was much influenced by the work of Smart. In terms of its application to RE Smart's six dimensional underpinning led to a concentration on aspects such as festivals, rites of passage, pilgrimage, sacred books, founders of religions etc.

These two dimensions ran side by side in the 1970s but were rarely integrated. In the early years of schooling in particular, the implicit approach was seen as a foundation for the later understanding of the more explicit aspects of religion. In practice there developed an approach to primary RE that concentrated almost solely on the implicit to the exclusion of the explicit. Themes such as 'caring' and practices such as having pets in the classroom, whilst dealing with important aspects of human experience did so with little or no reference to religions. In the most extreme cases it was possible to imagine that the removal of RE from the curriculum would make little or no difference to what went on. A subject called social studies or personal, social and moral education could quite easily embrace such an approach. Likewise any concentration on the explicit tended to do so in a way that divorced the study of religion from the concerns of human experience. There was a danger of explicit RE becoming a collection of strange customs and observances that bore little relevance and relationship to children's own existential concerns. The first attempt to develop the implicit and explicit approaches and make connections between them was made by Grimmitt (1973).

The Birmingham syllabus, which was published in 1975, was the next 'landmark' syllabus. It was so on two accounts; it was the first syllabus to describe its content in terms of the six major world religions and hence became the first truly multi-faith syllabus and in its introduction, if not in its programme of study, it sought to describe how the implicit and explicit dimensions could be integrated. This is illustrated in the quotation from the syllabus given above.

2.5   1980s onwards: a growing consensus

During the 1980s and into the 1990s a general consensus developed among compilers of agreed syllabuses as to the aims of RE. The Waltham Forest syllabus which was the last syllabus to be prepared before the passing of the 1988 Education Reform Act reflected this consensus.

> The principal aim of religious education is to enable pupils to understand, reflect upon and respond to the religious and spiritual beliefs, practices, insights and experiences that are expressed in humanity's search for meaning in life. Also to provide opportunities for pupils to explore their personal understanding of their own beliefs (Waltham Forest 1988).

Other examples which illustrate this consensus about the aims of religious education include the two syllabuses quoted below.

The Agreed Syllabus for RE, Oxfordshire 1993

> Aims of Religious Education
> 1   To be aware of and respond to life experiences and the questions they raise
> 2   To know about and understand religious beliefs and practices
> 3   To evaluate the significance of religious concepts, beliefs and practices by being able to express personal opinions based on the use of appropriate evidence and argument

The Agreed Syllabus for RE, Redbridge 1995

> The aim of Religious Education is to promote the spiritual, moral, social, cultural and intellectual development of pupils by encouraging them to explore and respond to those aspects of religion and human experience, which raise fundamental questions of belief and value.

2.6   The Schools Curriculum and assessment Authority: Model syllabuses for RE.

In 1994 The Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (now QCA) published two Model Syllabuses for RE. This resulted from a concern by government that those who are responsible for producing agreed syllabuses should receive as much guidance as possible; especially about what to teach at each key stage. Groups representing the six major religions met to decide what about their faith they would wish pupils to learn. Their deliberations were published as two 'models': *Living Faiths* and *Questions and Teachings*.

With regard to the aims of the subject the model syllabuses summarised the consensus that had arisen in contemporary agreed syllabuses. They stated;

> **The following aims of religious education reflect a broad consensus about the subject's educational rationale and purpose. Religious education should help pupils to**
>
> - acquire and develop knowledge and understanding of Christianity and the other principal religions represented in Great Britain;
>
> - develop an understanding of the influence of beliefs, values and traditions on individuals, communities, societies and cultures;
>
> - develop the ability to make reasoned and informed judgments about religious and moral issues, with reference to the teachings of the principal religions represented in Great Britain;
>
> - enhance their spiritual, moral, cultural and social development by:

-developing awareness of the fundamental questions of life
raised by human experiences, and of how religious teachings
can relate to them

-responding to such questions with reference to the teachings
and practices of religions, and to their own understanding and
experience

-reflecting on their own beliefs, values and experiences in the
light of their study;

- develop a positive attitude towards other people, respecting their
right to hold different beliefs from their own, and towards living in
a society of diverse religions (SCAA 1994, 4. Bold text in
original).

The model syllabuses also recommended two attainment targets that had
become axiomatic in RE at the time, and have become an accepted basis for
pedagogical strategies in RE (Grimmitt 2000, 16-21) ever since. These were;

Attainment Target 1: Learning about religions

This includes the ability to:

- identify, name, describe and give accounts in order to build a
coherent picture of each religion;
- explain the meaning of religious language, story and symbolism;
- explain similarities and differences between, and within,
religions

Attainment Target 2: Learning from religion

This includes the ability to:

- give an informed and considered response to religious and moral issues;
- reflect on what might be learnt from religions in the light of one's own beliefs and experience;
- identify and respond to questions of meaning within religions.

2.7   A National Non Statutory Framework for RE

As the new millennium dawned there was increasing debate as to the benefits or not of a national (albeit non-statutory) approach to the subject. In 2003 the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) published a feasibility study that resulted in the publication of a national non-statutory national framework for religious education (QCA 2004). The development of this framework involved close working with and accountability to the faith communities in the UK. In this document the aims of RE were encompassed in a statement-in line with national curriculum documents-of the importance of religious education. The statement reads:

> Religious education provokes challenging questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, beliefs about God, the self and the nature of reality, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human. Religious education develops pupils' knowledge and understanding of Christianity, other principal religions, other religious traditions, and other world-views that offer answers to questions such as these. It offers opportunities for personal reflection and spiritual development. It enhances pupils' awareness and understanding of religious beliefs, teachings, practices and forms of expression, as well as of the influence of religion on individuals, families, communities and cultures.

Religious education encourages pupils to learn from different religions, beliefs, values and traditions while exploring their own beliefs and questions of meaning. It challenges pupils to reflect on, consider, analyse, interpret and evaluate issues of truth, belief, faith and ethics and to communicate their responses.

Religious education encourages pupils to develop their sense of identity and belonging. It enables them to flourish individually within their communities and as citizens in a pluralistic society and global community. Religious education has an important role in preparing pupils for adult life, employment and life long learning. It enables them to develop respect and sensitivity to others, in particular those with faiths and beliefs different from their own. It promotes discernment and enables pupils to combat prejudice (QCA 2004, 7).

In September 2007 QCA published a non statutory national curriculum for RE for secondary schools (key stages 3 and 4) based on the 2004 national framework.

2.8   2010 Non Statutory Guidance

Finally in 2010 QCA published some non statutory guidance which based its understanding of the importance of RE on the 2004 framework and listed three major areas to which RE is intended to make an important contribution; spiritual, moral, social and cultural development; personal development and well-being; and community cohesion.

This section of the thesis, therefore, outlines the key milestones in the development of the aims for RE during the period since the 1870 Education Act and thus forms a reference point for the following discussion.

3.   The self understanding of religious education

3.1   Why is it important to concentrate on the self understanding of RE?

Whilst research in religious education over the years has focused on a diversity of issues, for example pupils' religious thinking and their attitudes towards the subject; religious language; religious experience; spiritual development and the nature and legitimacy of faith based schooling, recent research suggests that issues relating to the nature and purpose of religious education have dominated the subject's discourse both nationally and internationally since the turn of the millennium (Freathy, 2007). On reflection this is not surprising as in an overcrowded school curriculum a subject that doesn't know what it is and what distinctive contribution it can make is constantly in danger of being marginalised. As Doble (2010, 175) has pointed out, 'a consensual model for RE in public space is essential, and its practitioners need constantly to clarify what they are about. For the rest, this case raises questions of logic and history, of 'representing' religion, about RE's aims.'

A key factor in the discourse about the subject's identity and purpose is reflected in the need to address the fact that the religious education classroom of the 21st century is characterised by plurality (Pollefeyt, 2008; Meijer, 2007). Such a concern has been evident since the 1970s when, in the UK, Ninian Smart argued for the replacement of confessionally based theology by a more naturalistically grounded religious studies within secular institutions such as the university and school. Alberts (2007) refers to the kind of religious education that involves the study of a number of religions as 'integrative' religious education. She describes this approach as:

> A particular form of school religious education in which children of a
> class are not separated-as opposed to separative confessional

approaches-but learn together about different religions (Alberts 2007, 1).

Such an approach has, according to Alberts, two distinctive aspects:

> The non-separative educational framework, which takes religious plurality-in schools and society in general-as its starting point and which requires a concept for dealing with diversity in the classroom, in particular with respect to teaching about different religions, and making various religions the subject matter without taking the perspective of any of these religions as an overall framework (Alberts 2007, 1).

Whilst this is an international concern, debates within religious education in the UK have largely been focused on the second aspect of the above; namely if it is inappropriate to approach the study of religions from any one particular religious perspective, what perspective is appropriate? This goes to the heart of the issue of subject identity. How does a subject called *religious* education, in seeking to avoid the pitfalls of the perspective of any one religious tradition, develop a distinctive character that is true to the nature of its subject matter? Or in other words is it possible to argue for, and develop an approach to religiosity that is somehow religious in character yet not confessionally bound to any one tradition? Is it possible for multi faith religious education to reflect a distinctive *religious* character in its subject matter and avoid becoming a version of citizenship, sociology or history of religions?

In the UK the work of Ninian Smart 'has considerably influenced integrative RE, particularly in its early years but to some extent up to the present' (Alberts 2007, 86).
In the decades since Smart's promotion of a phenomenological approach a variety of critics have found fault with it, particularly in terms of how, according to the critics, it misrepresents religions as understood by their adherents (See for example, Barnes 2000, 2001, 2007a, 2007b, 2008 and Barnes and Wright 2006). One of Barnes' main arguments is that in seeking to liberate religious education from its Christian confessional underpinnings religious educators

have, following and adapting Smart's approach, effectively replaced a Christian confessionalism with confessionalism in another form namely 'the pluralist doctrine that all religions are valid public expressions of private encounters with the divine' (Barnes 2009, 9). Such an approach, according to Barnes, is informed by a liberal protestant doctrine of universal encounter with the transcendent that grants all religions validity and fails to recognise their different claims to truth.

Hand states that if Barnes is correct, and there are others who to an extent share his view (For example Wright 1993, 1997, 1998) then 'the only way to fix the structural flaws in the edifice of religious education is to tear it to the ground and rebuild it from scratch' (Barnes 2009,10).

This study takes the view that it does not make sense to extinguish the past and start again. Rather we should learn the lessons of the past and rebuild on it and refine it. Whilst it is possible to reject a phenomenological approach for the reasons highlighted by its critics, we do have to form a view about religious phenomena because the phenomena of religions are the raw material of the subject religious education. Therefore the main focus of this study is how we might better understand the nature and place of religious phenomena in religious education and how that may best be studied. Nevertheless before addressing this it is important to reflect in this chapter something of how the nature and purpose of the subject has been understood, and contested, in the recent past. Only then can the possibility of its future character be addressed.

3.2   How has the nature of RE been understood?

3.2.1 Historical perspective:

The question of the self understanding of religious education in UK schools has never been without its controversies. Even prior to the 1870 Education Act the place of Christian teaching in schools had been controversial as witnessed in a dispute between Dr Andrew Bell, an Anglican and Joseph Lancaster, a Quaker. Bell favoured the kind of teaching that took place in the church schools which was catechistic whilst Lancaster favoured non-sectarian teaching of what he called 'general Christian principles and them only' (Teece 1994, 15). Such impartiality was reinforced in the 1870 Act through the Cowper Temple clause. This clause essentially governed how the teaching of Christianity was to be understood during the decades leading up to the 1944 Education Act.

However, Copley points out that between the years 1934 and 1939 there were various articles in the journal *Religion in Education Quarterly* about the philosophy and nature of religious education and that '[E]ducationally defensible RE did not arise *ex nihilo* in the sixties and seventies' (Copley 1998, 87). One could add to this the issue of the relationship between religion, or the study of religion, and education. Copley identifies clearly how many articles on Bible teaching during those years addressed the issue of the need for religion; in most cases this meant the Bible or 'the scriptures', to be 'concerned with *religion* rather than the history of religion'. In other words there was, as now, a major concern about religious education having a *distinctive* character that reflected the essential nature of its subject matter (Smart 1968). In the 1930s this largely amounted to warnings about the danger of neglecting theology (Copley 1998, 83). This was because, arguably, theology was seen as what might be referred to as the 'parent subject'. [3] As

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[3] What I'm suggesting here is that if the academic disciplines called Geography and History, for example, form the basis of the Geography and History school curriculum it has always been a contentious and unresolved issue as to what academic discipline (or disciplines?) be it theology, religious studies, philosophy, sociology etc., forms the basis for the religious education curriculum.

will be shown below, this is a recurring issue for the subject and is, essentially the major focus of this study.

The thorny question of how to address the subject matter of religious education was an ongoing issue throughout what Hull refers to as the Christian nurture years (Hull 1982, xiii) and the belief that state sponsored religious education should 'not influence the minds of children on disputed questions of religion' (Hull 1982, xii) was reinforced in the 1944 Education Act. Copley (2005, 149) tends to think that the nervousness about teaching *religion* stems from a characteristically British embarrassment about the subject. Nevertheless it is clearly evident that the subject whether it is labelled, religious *education*, religious *studies,* religious *instruction* or even religious *knowledge* has always had at its core an issue with the question of what it is to teach religion. This could be seen to make religious education something of an anomaly in the curriculum. This anomaly has been pointed out by a number of commentators, for example Newbigin (1977), Moran (1989, 98-107) and Copley (2005, 149). Moran is particularly illuminating here when he states:

> As professor in a university, I do teach, among other things, religious education, that is I teach teachers about the teaching of religion. In the U.K. teaching religion is sometimes used interchangeably with teaching religious education. Writers seem unaware of the logical problem with that and unaware of what a strange use of language it is to make religious education the object of the act of teaching. Does one teach the child education? (Moran 1989, 100).

If the direct teaching of religion was seen to be an issue prior to the 1944 Education Act, then it became an even more contentious issue when in the late 1960s and early 1970s the teaching of world religions was introduced into religious education syllabuses. This was an intensely creative period in which religious educators were forced to reconceptualise their subject to such an extent that Hull (1982, xiv) believes led to the creation of a new subject.

I have illustrated something of the development of aims in RE in the previous chapter but this is not the place to enter into an historical survey of the development of British religious education with its peaks and troughs (Copley 2008, xiii). This has been more than adequately achieved by a number of significant commentators who have to a greater or lesser extent traced the origins of, and reasons for, this reconceptualisation. For example, most comprehensively Copley (2008); more contemporaneously of the time, Hull (1982); with regard to the need to teach about the major religions of the world, Bates (1994 and 1996) and with a specific regard for pedagogy, Grimmitt 2000). Rather, what this study is concerned with is to be found in a number of questions posed firstly in 1971 by the *Schools Council Working Paper 36* and in 2008 by Copley. In 1971 the authors of the Schools Council Working Paper referring to 'rapid social and educational changes in recent years' listed six questions prompted by the demands of the social and educational context in which schools found themselves at that time:

- What are the educational reasons for including any subject in the curriculum?
- Should religion have a place? If so, what place?
- If the term 'religious education' is used, what exactly is meant, and what is not meant by it?
- How far should religion be taught or studied from any one religious standpoint?
- Is there a unique contribution made by *religious* education that is not made, for example, by *social* education or *moral* education?
- What is the difference between the task of the school in religious education and that of the church, home, synagogue, or mosque?

It is interesting to compare these questions with questions posed by Copley in the second edition of his historical survey of religious education in England and Wales. He proposes (2008, xii) that the questions for religious education in the second decade of the twenty first century are about 'what its subject matter will be, what pedagogy will be appropriate and the precise form of its

presence in the curriculum. Should RE relate to the humanities, notably history and geography? To personal and social education? Is citizenship as a subject the natural friend or foe of RE? Should RE relate more closely to the creative arts, and subjects that seek to nurture the imagination? Or is RE a loner, offering something unique and distinctive?'

What is remarkable about these sets of questions is how similar they are despite nearly forty years of curriculum development and theoretical discussion in the religious education literature. If one was to try and characterise each publication's overriding concern it might be articulated in the question, what makes religious education distinctive as a curriculum subject?

3.2.2   What is the academic discipline that informs school based religious education?

Key to this question of distinctiveness lies the contested question, clearly evident since the introduction of world religions into religious education in the early 1970s as to what is the 'parent' subject of religious education. As the first hypothesis of this study states, since the abandonment of what has come to be known as 'confessional' religious education, religious educators have largely followed the paradigm established in the 1970s which was informed by liberal Christian theology and phenomenology. This paradigm owed much to the work of Ninian Smart who was Professor of Religious Studies in the University of Lancaster. The 'Lancaster Project' resulted in a number of influential publications through the Schools Council. Indeed Copley (2008, 103) says it is hard to overemphasise the influence of the approach taken in *Schools Council Working Paper 36* during the two decades that followed its publication. Such influence can be seen in agreed syllabuses published from the mid 1970s onwards, in classroom practice and, despite the interruption of the 1988 Education Act with its controversies about calls to reintroduce a

Christian form of religious education[4], as the foundation of current debates within the religious education literature today. Such debates revolve around a critical discussion of the limitations of the phenomenological model.

The self understanding of post 1960s religious education has its roots in Smart's radical move from seeing theology as the 'parent' subject of religious education to the adoption of religious studies as the subject's underpinning. Copley (2008, 100) points out that the post of professor of Religious Studies to which Smart was appointed in 1966, the first in the U.K., was advertised inviting applicants of any religious persuasion or none. In *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion* (1968) Smart said that theology's position as the 'queen of sciences' was doubtful for two reasons. Firstly that in an increasingly pluralistic society[5] many in education are sceptical of the truth of Christianity. Secondly that even if theology can counter the sceptic by claiming to be concerned merely with linguistic and historical questions about the Bible and so claim to be as 'objective' and scientific as other linguistic and historical disciplines, 'there remains a suspicion that the choice of documents for deep investigation-the Bible and early Christian texts-presupposes a view about revelation which sceptics cannot share' (Smart 1968, 9). Hence departments of theology have an 'unwarranted' place in modern universities because theology is essentially a form of Christian education and universities are secular institutions. This leads to a form of schizophrenia in religious education (Smart 1968, 90). Smart goes on to say that what he says about the presence of theology in universities applies equally as well to the study of religion in schools.

Theology is, according to Smart, 'an enigmatic figure'. He says that there is a serious omission from its title in that it is assumed that it is Christian theology. Because there are other theologies such as Muslim and Hindu, and because it appears inappropriate to apply the term theology to Buddhism, which does

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[4] Copley (2008, 170) notes developments in the debate about the nature and purpose of religious education from 1990 onwards 'could have arisen quite easily without the Act'.

[5] In the passage referred to Smart uses the word pluralistic to describe a society of increasingly diverse religious commitments, although he uses plural elsewhere. This has some problems as the word

not entail belief in God, he prefers the title *doctrinal enquiry*. The title theology draws attention to two assumptions; that there is a God and 'that it is the Christian tradition with which it is essentially concerned' (Smart 1968, 12). He does admit that there is a sense in which theology does not assume the existence of God, in that it is possible merely to study Christian texts and Christian history from 'an objective and scientific' point of view. This, however points to a 'fundamental ambiguity'. This is that it is possible to study such texts and history in two different ways; from a purely historical and descriptive point of view and from a point that views them as 'relevant to, or as enshrining claims about the nature of reality' (Smart 1968, 12). He goes on to label the former means of study as historical and the latter as parahistorical. For example, '[T]he question of whether Jesus lived in Galilee is…a historical question; but the question of whether he died for men's' (sic) sins is parahistorical' (Smart 1968, 13) although the question of whether Jesus thought he died for human sin reverts to a historical question; as would the question of whether Christians believe that he died for human sin.

Essentially any study of religion should include both forms of enquiry but, according to Smart, such an enquiry must 'be done by liberating theology from the narrow confines of the past' (Smart 1968, 14). What Smart was concerned with was establishing a methodological identity for religious studies which differed from and was independent of theological enquiry. At its simplest this means that, to quote Smart (1973, 4) 'there has been much written about the truth *of* religion and rather less concerning the truth *about* religion [my emphasis]. Consequently Smart's concern was to establish a new way of studying religion that eschewed theology's confessional underpinnings. He often referred to this as a 'science of religion', a study that was objective and neutral in that it sought to study religions as they are, so to speak, from a point of view that did not impose on a particular religion prejudices and presuppositions derived from the observer's own value system, that does not 'assume from the outset a position of certainty about religious truth' (Arthur 1990, 6).

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suggests something ideological in that it could be said to refer to a particular stance toward the fact of plurality. I would prefer the term plural as it is merely descriptive.

In setting out his famous typology of religions into six dimensions Smart was at pains to point out the essential link between the historical and parahistorical dimensions[6]. As he stated (Smart 1968, 20), 'each group needs the other for explication (no worship without doctrinal or mythological focus, no concept of God without reference to worship)'. And crucial to the on going discussion about the nature of religious education in schools and its modern day criticisms, Smart maintains:

> Theology and religious studies need to bear these facts in mind if they are to escape unrealism, either by way of neglecting the religious milieu of theology or by way of neglecting the theological focus of religion (Smart 1968, 20).

By stressing the need for the historical and parahistorical to inform each other Smart clearly believed that he avoided such accusations of unrealism. Smart's response to this danger was to emphasise that a study of religion that only concentrates on either historical description or on parahistorical claims is unbalanced. So to emphasise only the descriptive, historical in religious education is to fall prey to the kind of pedagogical criticism such as that advanced in later years by Grimmitt who says that phenomenological religious education has become a bland study of separate reified accounts of religious traditions (See, for example Grimmitt, 2000: 12). However, there is also the danger of placing an unbalanced emphasis on the latter. As Smart states;

> it would be facile to think of religious ideas as existing just in people's heads or on paper. They can only be properly understood in their living milieu. Thus Christian theology has to be seen in its institutional and sacramental environment. It has to do with faith, with people, with worship. It is not *just* a piece of metaphysics, and not a free-floating ideology. [In fact] religious ideas are not just ideas but *religious* ideas (Smart 1968, 15).

So although the educational aim is 'the production of a ripe capacity to judge the truth of what is propagated' (97), it is important that students develop and exercise 'skilful sensitivity' (95), which the phenomenological *epoche* (suspension of judgement) and empathy was designed to help bring about.

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[6] The parahistorical dimensions are doctrines, myths and ethics whilst the historical dimensions are ritual, experiential and social.

3.3   Criticisms of the 'establishment' view of religious education

However subsequent developments, arguably failed to take this into account
turning religious education into the presentation of 'dry facts' or providing
dubious superficial thematic teaching that undermined the nature of each
religious tradition and prevented students from addressing the parahistorical
claims to truth of each tradition. In so doing religious education was also,
according to some critics, guilty of promoting a view of religion that ignored
difference in favour of a universal faith where all religions are seen as equally
valid manifestations of a single divine source. In addition to these
shortcomings Copley has pointed out that in the forty years following the
Schools Council Working Paper 36, there has been almost no dialogue
between professional religious educators and professional theologians in the
UK (Copley 2008, 207). This has, according to Copley (2008, 2007)
impoverished both communities: 'In its efforts to be perceived as an
essentially educational exercise and not a religious one, RE lost touch with
the changes and insights it might have gained from theology.' Over the same
period a number of religious educators have called for a rapprochement
between the confessional and phenomenological models reflecting the
inadvisability of marginalising theology from religious education: see for
example, Slee (1989) and Watson (1992). Furthermore Cooling (1996) insists
that any view of the nature and purpose of religious education involves a
theological position.

Nevertheless Copley (2008, 194) states that by the year 2000 such
developments in religious education had led to an 'establishment view of RE'.
In many ways it is the perceived theological position of what Wright (1993)
referred to as 'Modern RE' that has been the focus of an ongoing critical
debate firstly in the political debates surrounding the Education Reform Act
1988 (See for example Burn and Hart 1988; Hansard 1992; Copley 2008,
128-152 and more recently and systematically by religious educators for
example, Erricker 2006; Jackson 1997; Wright 1993; 1997; 1998 and 2004;
Barnes 2000; 2001; 2007a; 2007b; 2008 and Barnes and Wright 2006).

The most significant aspect of these criticisms is the claim, particularly forcefully expressed by Barnes (2007a, 25-27), that religious education based on the phenomenological approach misrepresents the nature of religion. His argument has three main points:

Firstly it 'inculcate [s] in pupils the idea that religions are complementary and not in competition with each other' and this contradicts the self-understanding of most religious adherents and the 'doctrinal logic' of the different traditions. He argues that religious identities are exclusive-one cannot be both a Christian and a Muslim. So to, 'present the different religions in the classroom as acknowledging the truth of each other' is again to contradict the self-understanding of most religious adherents.

Secondly in order to present the religions as equally true involves the minimising of religious doctrines and their revision. Barnes quotes Hick as one who advocates that in order to achieve a more inclusive attitude to other religions, some, 'cardinal doctrines…have to be revised and reinterpreted'. This revisionary perspective pursued by Western academics is, according to Barnes, not acknowledged in modern British educational discourse. So 'what is offered to pupils in schools is a particular vision of what religion should be (as reconstructed by liberal theological interpreters), not what it is'. Furthermore, such a move towards idealisation of representations of religion is encouraged by, 'the *refusal*, [my emphasis] inherited from phenomenology, to subject the truth of religion to close analysis and criticism'.

Barnes' third point is that the strategy of 'convincing pupils that the religions are in essential agreement' undermines respect for difference-one of phenomenological religious education's central aims. It does so because respect for difference is based on convincing pupils that the religions are essentially in agreement and so is predicated on religious agreement and not difference, the implication of which is that there is no respect for difference where there is genuine disagreement. In this sense the liberal approach has the capacity to 'demonise' the Other. The consequence of this is that the line

between insiders and outsiders is not drawn between say, Christians and Muslims but between inclusivists and exclusivists. 'Respect for religious difference is compromised when those who are accepted and affirmed must first relinquish any claim to uniqueness or religious distinctiveness.'

If these criticisms were true of Smart's intentions and considering the influence of Smart's pioneering work on 'integrative RE' then Hand (2008) may have a point in saying that following Barnes' argument implies that RE needs to start again from scratch. However, as can be seen from the discussion of Smart's key ideas, above, it is difficult to see how Barnes' claims can be made to stick.

Essentially criticisms of the phenomenological approach to religious education have focused on two major areas of concern. The first, as expressed by Barnes, concerns the phenomenological understanding of the nature of religion with its view of universal essences that forms, according to its critics a type of implicit confessionalism and a reductionist account of religious truth and authenticity. The second is the application of 'stereotypical simplified versions of his [Smart's] six dimensional model of religion' which 'were also labelled phenomenological' (Alberts 2007, 91). As Alberts (2007, 90) points out these criticisms can only be applied 'partially-if at all' to Smart's original intentions for the subject and 'Smart uses the word 'phenomenological' in a particular way.' It could be argued that he borrows from phenomenology, in a similar way that Hick borrows from Kant for his interpretation of religion. Doble (2010, 175) points out that Smart deployed a pragmatic rather than philosophical phenomenology and, furthermore, 'would not recognise Barnes's account'. Lovatt (2001) even goes as far as saying, in response to Barnes, that phenomenologists such as Husserl- upon whom many of the critics of phenomenological religious education lay the blame for its inappropriate understanding of religion-was not overly concerned with essences and that his thesis was chiefly a methodological concern. Certainly Smart does not presuppose universal essences (Smart 1975; Jackson 1997, Alberts 2007, 91).

Furthermore, whilst contributions to the discourse by such as Barnes and Wright have certainly invigorated philosophical debates about religious education and have rightly pointed out some genuinely problematical issues, there is now a sense in which there has developed a new orthodoxy. Such orthodoxy insists that that the only correct way to understand and interpret religion is in a traditionally conservative, largely Christian, rationalistic way that understands religious commitment as an exclusivist adherence to contested propositional belief. This not only makes unwarranted assumptions about the nature of the experience of many adherents of religions who do not take such a view but potentially narrows the possibilities for religious education in that it 'distorts religion into a matter of true v. false knowledge' and furthermore claims 'about religions being primarily about truth claims is not an understanding of religion that would find ready acceptance amongst many theorists of religion' (Strhan 2010, 33). Furthermore such an approach potentially 'indoctrinates students into a distorted understanding of what it is to be religious' and 'tends to present religion in too simplistic terms as assent to certain religious propositions' (Strhan 2010, 31).

For a radically different account of the place of truth, faith and belief in religion see, for example, Armstrong (2009).

3.4   Why does the debate about the nature and purpose of RE need enriching and refining?

Nevertheless despite any faults that may be found in Barnes' criticism of phenomenological religious education or his interpretation of religion, most religious educators agree that very often the legacy from Lancaster has been poorly applied to the subject and this has led to much criticism and debate. A number of ways forward have been suggested. See for example Grimmitt (2000) and Alberts (2007) for comprehensive surveys of such developments.

My concern in all this is to address the issue highlighted many times by Copley (1998; 2005 and 2008) of how religious education might reflect the *religious* nature of its content and so claim to be a distinctive subject on the curriculum. Copley is very interesting here as he has argued that the content of religious education has become largely secularised and so does not reflect anything that is characteristically *religious*.

From the debates in the 1930s about the need of Bible teaching to reflect religion rather than history (Copley 1998, 87), to the presentation of bland themes on festivals and founders of religion in more recent times, that according to Copley 'are nearly always secular' in that they rarely included subjects such as 'God, revelation, sin, mysticism or prayer' (Copley 2005, 120) religious education has, according to Copley consistently neglected or marginalised the distinctiveness of its subject matter and in so doing has denied young people the opportunity to engage with religion. The most powerful example that Copley gives of this is of the secularising of the character of Joseph/Yusuf (Copley 2005, 121-126). Joseph/Yusuf is a significant figure for Jews, Christians and Muslims appearing in Genesis, the Gospel of Matthew and the Qur'an which has a surah named after him. Copley points out, however, that there is a 'fourth Joseph'; a secular version of the Joseph narrative without any mention of God, a kind of 'secular adventure story' reflected most prominently in the musical *Joseph and the Technicolor Dream Coat.* The crucial point, however, for religious educators to reflect on is 'merely because the narrative originates in the Bible, it was still being hailed as RE' (Copley 2005, 122).

It is little wonder then that OfSTED (2007, 35) should suggest that whilst students' lack of understanding in RE may be due at least in part to superficial representation of religious traditions in the classroom; stereotyping of religious believers; and insufficient challenge in terms of tasks set; the key factor inhibiting student achievement is teachers' lack of understanding of the content and pedagogy of the subject and their uncertainty about how students can make progress in their learning in RE. Consequently, pupils do not

possess a secure conceptual framework within which to fit their learning (OfSTED 2007, 10).

Furthermore the *Non Statutory Framework for Religious Education* states that it 'aims to promote religious understanding' (QCA 2004, 9) but unfortunately nowhere in the document is this either defined or described.

Copley (2005, 83ff) is concerned with the relationship between spirituality and religion, which he contends have become separated, with the majority of people finding spirituality relevant to their lives but religion increasingly irrelevant. What is required is a rapprochement; perhaps the need to 'rethink the idea of religion' (143) so that students in school based religious education might be enabled to 'theologize' within a subject that 'includes the spiritual in RE without being confessional' (Copley 2005, 128).

Perhaps the most interesting and relevant 'agenda' for religious educators to consider for the future development of the subject is provided by Rudge. In summarising his article on the Westhill Project in Grimmitt (2000, 107-108) he poses a number of questions that he believes religious educators need to debate in regard to future developments. These are:

> How can we address the needs of the great majority of pupils for whom the religious world represents a different planet from the one they inhabit?

His suggestion is that religious communities might turn their attention to what there is in their traditions that might contribute to the spiritual and moral education of all pupils in school.

> A further question that needs re-addressing is, what do we mean by religion?...What kinds of questions is religious education really about? What we need to answer that question is a fresh and shared understanding of religion.

Finally, he asks:

> How can we avoid allowing our teaching to fall into mere factualism,
> the process by which religious education degenerates into the
> transmission of information about religions, because it is the easiest
> thing to do, it does not require us to think about why we are giving out
> this information, and it avoids controversy? It is the basis of a
> curriculum for no-one, with no educational purpose, going nowhere.

In seeking to address such issues, this study takes the view that John Hick's interpretation of religion can move us forward in this task not least because he describes his 'theory' of religion as *religious* in that it is not developed within the confines of a particular confessional conviction nor is it *naturalistic*, treating religion merely as a human phenomenon (Hick 1989, 1). Such an interpretation of religion it will be argued is a valuable source for enriching and refining the legacy left by Ninian Smart whilst at the same time providing *religious* education with a distinctive character that rather than misrepresenting religions leaves them in place, so to speak, but highlights the *religiousness* of the traditions which can give the subject its distinctive identity.

4. Climbing the foothills of Understanding: The influence and development of John Hick's work

4.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the first part of the third research question of my thesis. In beginning to argue that John Hick's religious interpretation of religion can contribute to a new understanding of the study of religion in RE, the first part of the hypothesis relating to this question states that Hick's work needs to be read as a whole. For ease of reference I will repeat what is written in the introduction to the thesis.

Up until now nobody has written in favour of Hick's work as having the potential to inform the theory and practice of multi faith religious education. Despite the fact that there is overwhelming evidence of Hick's influence in theology and philosophy of religion there is little evidence of his influence in RE. Many of those who have written about Hick have tended to have a negative view of his work and have criticised his pluralist hypothesis as one that leads to a misinterpretation of religion. It is the contention of this hypothesis that no fair and balanced critique of Hick's work can be achieved unless his work is read as a whole. Therefore before holding Hick's interpretation of religion up to critical scrutiny it is essential to present an overview of his work and trace some epistemological and thematic consistencies that are evident throughout it from his interpretation of Christian faith in *Faith and Knowledge* (1957) up to his *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989). To provide such an overview is the purpose of this chapter.

4.2   Hick's influence in philosophy of religion and theology

There is little doubt that after more than fifty years of scholarly research and writing that Hick is now regarded as a major figure on both sides of the Atlantic in the fields of philosophy of religion and Christian theology. This is evidenced, as Badham (1993, 5) points out, by inviting the reader to pick up any contemporary work in the philosophy of religion or modern Christian theology and count the number of references to Hick in the index. Such has been the critical attention given to Hick's work that, to date, there have been more than twenty books, more than fifty academic dissertations and over two hundred journal articles devoted to analysing and critically discussing his work. (Hick 2003, 322). Whilst most of this work originates from either the United States or the United Kingdom there is an increasing interest in his work in the Far East where there have been several critical studies published in either Chinese or Japanese. There have been a number of articles on Hick's work in Chinese academic journals and the influence of his work can even be found in the Japanese novelist Shusaku Endo's book *Deep River* (Hick 2003, 285-86).

A considerable amount of the discussion in the United States and on this side of the Atlantic has been critical, and at times antagonistic to Hick's formulations arising from the conservative and evangelical wing of Christian theology. However there has been a growing acceptance that whilst fellow scholars might find fault with his work the questions and issues that he raises, particularly about religious diversity, cannot be ignored. Hick believes that such a development is more evident in the United States where conservative theologians have accepted that Hick's pluralist hypothesis presents a challenge to their work. For example William Alston, whose *Perceiving God*, a major work that argues for the rationality of basing religious beliefs on religious experience, and is heavily influenced by Hick's own *Faith and Knowledge*, states that religious pluralism presents the biggest problem for his approach (Alston 1991, 255). And Alvin Plantinga devotes a chapter in his *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000) to criticising Hick's position. More recently

the evangelical Paul Rhodes Eddy has issued a careful exposition and critique of Hick's pluralist hypothesis and, whilst finding Hick's conclusions ultimately unsuccessful, states that nevertheless Hick's work stands a challenge to those who wish to reject the pluralist paradigm as a response to religious diversity (Eddy 2002, 204).

Such influence is less evident here in the UK where, according to Hick (2002) the philosophy of religion is still dominated by the traditional Judaeo-Christian approach to such matters as the existence of God and the problem of evil and Christian theologians are largely concerned with traditional matters such as the trinity. Indeed Birmingham University's theology department where Hick was H.G. Wood Professor of theology between 1967 and 1982, offered no courses in the philosophy of religion until fairly recently (Hick 2003, 318). It is also ironic that in America where there is no tradition of multi faith religious education in schools that text books should devote space to religious pluralism whereas in the UK, where there has been such a tradition for over thirty years, students studying philosophy of religion at 'A' level are working from syllabuses where issues about religious pluralism are conspicuous by their absence. However his influence in the philosophy of religion can be seen in the work of major scholars such as Keith Ward at Oxford, for example, who devotes some of his *Religion and Revelation* (1994) to discussing Hick and has written critical articles about Hick's work (See Ward, 1990; 1993). And the implications of Hick's pluralist hypothesis for orthodox Christian belief has often aroused Christian theologians to defend a position of theological *inclusivism* in the face of Hick's pluralism; the most notable of these being Gavin D'Costa (1987). Finally in 1995 Hick published *The Rainbow of Faiths: Critical Dialogues on Religious Pluralism*. This book is devoted to meeting the criticisms of his pluralist hypothesis in both fields on both sides of the Atlantic and takes the form of a dialogue with a philosopher (Phil) and a theologian (Grace). The range of references in this book alone offers significant evidence of the width and depth of his influence.

It might be objected that it is not possible to make any judgements about Hick's actual or potential influence because his work has ranged over so

many different topics. As Hick has pointed out he is known in different academic circles for different reasons. As a philosopher of religion he is known for his work on the religious ambiguity of the universe, the inadequacy of naturalism, the epistemology of faith, the veracity of religious experience. In theological circles he is best known for his work on the problem of evil and his statement of an Irenaean theodicy, and for his controversial statement of the metaphorical character of the concept of divine incarnation (Hick 2003, 321).

Chester Gillis states that one of the problems with studying Hick is that rather than offering a systematic presentation of theology Hick's work consists of 'a series of topical studies in shorter form'….and… 'this leaves the systematisation to someone else' (Gillis, 1989, 1). However this judgement is questionable. In recent years Hick himself has tended to present his work, if not in a systematic fashion, at least in terms of how his later work on pluralism has arisen naturally out of his earlier philosophical and theological concerns (See for example, Hick 2001, 1-21). In his recent autobiography he has said that his intellectual development has been 'surprisingly consistent apart from the interruption of the evangelical years' (Hick 2003, 33). As will be seen in the second part of this chapter a number of recent studies on Hick have emphasised that his work displays an essential unity (See for example, Cheetham 2003; Eddy 2002). Nevertheless whilst this has been recognised, it is probably true to say that he is known in both fields for his work over the last twenty years on religious pluralism.

One of the challenges that Hick presents to his critics is that because his work has aroused such interest and because he has always been ready and willing to respond to his critics his position on religious pluralism has become more subtle and nuanced over the years. Such constant development in his thought has had its effect. For example, one critic, Chester Gillis, who wrote critically of Hick's early pluralist hypothesis, has now come to agree with his later position. For evidence of this compare Gillis (1989) with Gillis (1993). The fact that Hick has written so widely, and the fact that his work has developed and become more nuanced over the years presents any critic with a considerable challenge.

4.3 The development of Hick's work

Hick's published work ranges over a wide field of theology and philosophy of religion. This work can be classified under three headings. Firstly, and most importantly, are his major works occurring at roughly ten-year intervals. These are in Hick's own words, 'problem driven, in the sense of being attempts to contribute to the solution of acutely felt problems facing religious persons' (Hick 2001, 1). These books are *Faith and Knowledge* (1957; 1966), *Evil and the God of Love* (1966; 1977), *Death and Eternal Life* (1976a), *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989: 2004) and *The New Frontier of Religion and Science: Religious Experience, Neuroscience and The Transcendent* (2006).

Secondly, and growing out of these major works, are articles and collections of articles in which Hick has attempted to elaborate on these major works and to respond to his critics. Significant collections of articles include *God and the Universe of Faiths* (1973), *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (1985), *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (1993b), *The Rainbow of Faiths: Critical Dialogues in Religious Pluralism* (1995), *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion* (2001) and *Who or what is God?*(2008).

Finally there are student textbooks the most well known of which is his *Philosophy of Religion* published by Prentice Hall. This book was originally published in 1963 and has since gone through four editions, the latest being 1990. It has sold over four hundred thousand copies in English and two hundred thousand in Chinese (Hick 2003, 123). As Hick has noted (Hick 2001, 1) the revisions to this book reflect the scope of the changes in the philosophy of religion during the period of more than half a century in which he has been a major contributor. One could also count in this category books written at various stages in his career designed for the general reader. These are significant in that they have made Hick's theology and philosophy available to a wider public. These include *Christianity at the Centre* (1968), reissued twice as *The Centre of Christianity* (1977) and *The Second*

Christianity (1983), *God has Many Names* (1980) and *The Fifth Dimension* (1999). These books reflect the changing nature of Hick's thought particularly in terms of Christianity's relationship to other religions and the consequences for an understanding of the figure of Jesus within that relationship.

Careful readers may wonder why I have not included *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977) as a major work considering the furore that this caused and that it is a work for which Hick is well known. Firstly it is an edited book, Hick contributed one chapter, and its concerns are with the subject of Christology. The implications of Hick's pluralist hypothesis are very important for Christology but this is not a subject that is central to this thesis. The same point can be made about the later book *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (1993a).

This study will be based around the themes of his major works. This is firstly because although on the face of it, they deal with widely differing subjects, it is impossible to have a full grasp of his later pluralist hypothesis without an intimate knowledge of how his thought developed during each stage. The second reason for taking this approach is because Hick in recent years has come to explain his work in this way:

> The facing of each (problem) has led on to the next, like climbing a mountain range and finding that as soon as you reach a summit another high mountain comes into view-but with the compensation that each stage of the climb opens up a wider view of the territory, and yet also with the awareness that only the foot-hills of truth have been reached (Hick 2001, 1: See also Preface to Hick 1999).

How far it is possible to argue for such a unity in Hick's work is open to debate. Critics such as Loughlin (1991) and D'Costa (for example 1991) maintain that Hick has changed his mind so many times that each new development in his thinking has largely cancelled out his previous positions. Indeed, according to D'Costa they are more like revolutions than developments. However the opposing point of view, that Hick's work displays

an essential unity and that his earlier work provides the foundation for his later work, is possibly a stronger argument. One reason for saying this is because it attracts both conservative and liberal theologians. For example two conservative Christian theologians, Sinkinson (2001) and Eddy (2002) along with a liberal, Cheetham (2003) argue that the unity of Hick's work is to be found in his epistemology. This is a strong argument, for his original claim that all perception (including religious perception) is mediated through our particular historical and cultural schemas has remained constant throughout his work. As has his insistence that religious language is essentially cognitive in nature; that it is not merely poetry expressing human projections but is making claims about the real world. Of course, this is where critics such as Loughlin and D'Costa, largely, pitch their arguments. They claim that Hick has modified these realist claims so much as to render his claim to be a realist as unsustainable. How far these are effective criticisms will be examined in the next chapter. But a new insight into the argument that Hick's work should be studied as a complete body of work comes from Cheetham (2003, 8). He writes;

> when seeking answers to the question of what unifies Hick's work, it is perhaps not to the actual consistencies in his arguments across the decades, or to the 'foundational' aspects in his thought that we should look. In fact, if we look at things differently, it seems that Hick's work has always addressed questions that *interest* people: What does my religious talk mean? Why do we suffer? Shall I live after death? What about other religions? Perhaps the common thread in Hick's work is that his questions (and his pursuit of answers) seem to make *religious* sense; that is, they are issues eminently worth bothering about.

If indeed this is the case, and Cheetham may well be correct in his analysis, then the attraction of Hick's work to the religious educator makes sense. It is a key theme of this study that such *interesting* work has until now been largely ignored by religious educators. Indeed Cheetham's point seems to be reinforced by Badham (1990, 2) when he writes:

Many philosophers of religion discuss their subject without themselves understanding the workings of the religious mind or the things that matter to religious faith. This has never been true of John Hick, which is why his work has always been focussed on the central issues confronting faith in the world today. But this awareness of what confronts faith is also crucial to understanding Hick. He has found it impossible to confine his theological thinking within a self-authenticating circle of faith. Rather he has sought to take up the challenge of making sense of faith to the thoughtful inquirer, and of responding to the challenge of the sceptic. And he has done this not in the spirit of a debater wishing to out-argue an adversary, but as a sensitive and perceptive thinker who has himself experienced the force of the intellectual challenge that faith encounters today.

4.4   Early influences

John Hick was born in Scarborough in 1922, the son of a solicitor. Hick's ancestors had been in shipping and were 'a group of ancestors of whom one can be proud' (Hick 2003, 9). The impression one gets from reading his autobiography is that the Hicks were people of strong character. This could go some way to explaining how Hick, who by his own admission, is by instinct 'conservative, cautious, timid and credulous', has displayed a 'bold propensity to ask questions and find flaws in arguments and inconsistencies in accepted belief systems'. Such an 'unsociable habit' has often got him into trouble (Hick 1985, 1).

From the age of sixteen Hick was reading Nietzsche, Leibniz, Mill, Schopenhauer and Freud amongst others. He clearly had a deep interest in philosophy and was introduced at this time to his mother's uncle, Edward Wales Hirst who had been a lecturer in Christians Ethics at Manchester University and the author of several books. The young Hick typed and proof read for him and after writing his last book Hirst gave his library of early twentieth century philosophical books to Hick (Hick 2003, 15-16). Other early

influences could be said to have had an impact on Hick's religious sensibility. Whilst services at the local parish church were 'infinitely boring and totally off putting' (Hick 2003, 27), his grandmother (from his mother's side) was adventurous in her religious explorations. She took the young Hick to lectures by British Israelite speakers and welcomed guests into her home such as George Jeffreys founder of the Four Square Alliance (later the Elim Church). His mother too was unorthodox with an interest in Spiritualism and Theosophy. Indeed Hick became attracted by Theosophy for a time before dismissing it as being 'too neat and tidy and professing to know too much' (Hick 2003, 31).

These early religious and philosophical influences led to two dispositions in the young John Hick. Firstly an absolute belief in 'some sort of divine reality, though not the God of Christian orthodoxy' (Hick 2003, 33) and secondly an acute philosophical brain that, even at the age of eighteen, produced the following sophisticated and prescient account of the divine (32):

> Reality is ethical and consists of God, who cannot be regarded as finite or infinite, or as having any or no form, or by any other analogy from the physical universe, but can only be comprehended 'mystically', by reason of the divine spark in each of us.

> To be personal is to be finite. God is not finite and therefore not personal. But the personal being with whom we can get into contact in prayer etc., whilst being finite, may yet be larger than the extent of our consciousness and therefore infinite in relation to us and our needs.

And the evidence that the young Hick was a 'questioning believer' can be found in the University of Hull's students' journal prior to his conversion. He wrote an article, which is one of his earliest published pieces, entitled 'On the Importance of Heresy' which he defined as 'that salutary state of mind in which everything is seen as alive and mysterious and worth looking at' (Hick 2003, 33). Such an attitude of mind was to lead in later years to Hick being accused of heresy by some members of the United Presbyterian Church of

America. When asked whether there was anything in the Westminster Confession of 1647 to which he took exception he mentioned several things; the literal interpretation of the first two chapters of Genesis; the double predestination to heaven and hell; and the virgin birth of Jesus. It was the latter that was to prove the catalyst of controversy for whilst Hick didn't deny the doctrine outright he did not affirm it nor think it essential to the doctrine of incarnation, which he did affirm.

Too much can be made of this period of Hick's life and Hick has often written that at the time he saw it as an irrelevance and on reflection as absurd (Hick, 1985, 1). But such an independence of mind and boldness to stand up for it when unpopular has marked Hick's intellectual development from his early days.

When Hick left home to go University in Hull it was with the intention to follow his father into the law. Edward Wales Hirst had written to his mother recommending that he should go to Manchester University to study philosophy but it was decided that the Law was a 'safer prospect' and that he could study philosophy in his spare time (Hick 2003, 16). It was as a student at Hull that he became converted to evangelical Christianity. Hick's closest friends at university were members of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship, an evangelical student organisation. So when Hick, on the top deck of a bus, had an experience of 'a sense of overflowing joy, in response to an immense transcendent goodness and love' it was unsurprising that he should interpret that experience in the form of an 'entire fundamentalist package' (34). Because of this experience Hick decided to make the switch from law and train for the Christian ministry within the Presbyterian Church; this being chosen because his Inter-Varsity Fellowship friends were members of the Presbyterian Church of England. Hick now regards this period of his life as an 'interruption' (Hick 2003, 33) to his intellectual development. Following his intention to enter the Christian ministry Hick went to Edinburgh University to study philosophy. Whilst at Edinburgh he was a keen member of the Christian Union in which he took an active part and enjoyed the fellowship. However he

notes that he was 'already beginning to sense in it a certain narrowness and a lack of sympathy with questioning thought' (Hick 1980, 3).

A little over a year later his university education was interrupted by the war years where he served in the Friends' Ambulance Unit. When he returned to study philosophy as a preliminary to his training for the ministry he became even more aware of a 'lack of integrity in fundamentalist circles, in that potentially unsettling questions were regularly suppressed rather than faced' (Hick 1993b, 139). So he did not rejoin the Christian Union but he remained for another twenty years a 'highly orthodox but no longer fundamentalist Christian' (Hick 2003, 35).

Hick received a First from Edinburgh and became the recipient of the first Campbell-Fraser scholarship to Oriel College, Oxford. At Oxford he came under the influence of H.H.Price a significant epistemologist who had more sympathy with Hick's interest in religion than did the dominant Oxford linguist analysis school at the time led by Gilbert Ryle. It was at Oxford that Hick completed his doctoral dissertation, which later formed his first book *Faith and Knowledge* (1957).

4.5   *Major themes in Hick's work*

Whilst it is possible to argue that there is a unity to Hick's work it is not necessary for the purpose of this thesis to examine all of his theology and philosophy of religion in the same depth. This is not primarily a study of the theology and philosophy of John Hick, as one might undertake as theologian or philosopher of religion. Rather as a religious educator I am interested in those aspects of Hick's work, which have potential for informing an approach to RE. Therefore less important, though not totally without significance, is his work on life after death and Christology. The aspects of Hick's work which are more directly significant are the three areas identified by Gillis (1991) as being of lasting significance; faith as a process of free and total interpretation of experience; the Irenaean theodicy; and his pluralist hypothesis. As William

Rowe (1993, 18) states, 'his contributions….are so extensive and far-reaching that any significant appraisal of his many important contributions is, I believe, beyond the competence of any single scholar'. It is interesting that Rowe goes on to identify the exact three areas of Hick's work as does Gillis, as most interesting and for critical scrutiny

Most religious educators have tended to view only Hick's pluralist hypothesis as significant for religious education and it is interesting that Hick, himself, has tended to take this view. In sending me his list of publications he attached a note saying, 'I will not bother you with stuff before I began to write about religious pluralism'; but as we have already seen, considered opinion from both liberals and conservatives would see his basic epistemology, as first outlined in *Faith and Knowledge*, as a foundation stone of his much later pluralist hypothesis. In this section I will look at the relationship between these aspects of Hick's work.

4.5.1   *The rationality of religious faith in an ambiguous universe*

In *Faith and Knowledge* (1957) Hick argued that rather than understanding religious faith as assent to divinely revealed propositions faith consisted in a free interpretation of the religious person's experience of the world lived in the presence of God. As he wrote:

> The ordinary believer ……claims an apprehension of God meeting him in and through his material and social environments. He finds that in his dealings with the world of men and things he is somehow having to do with God, and God with him. The moments of ordinary life possess, or may possess for him in varying degrees a religious significance (Hick 1957, 95-96).

However, that world, lived in the presence of God, experientially, by some people, is for other people interpreted naturalistically. Thus, whilst the religious person may experience the world religiously in a first-order kind of

way, any philosophical explanation of the world, as it actually is experienced by people in total, has to admit that we inhabit, from an explanatory point of view, an ambiguous universe. As he writes:

> The universe is religiously ambiguous in that it is possible to interpret it, intellectually and experientially, both religiously and naturalistically (Hick 1989, 12).

This is enormously significant for an understanding of Hick's work as a whole. Firstly because of this ambiguity theistic arguments for the existence of God, for example, are 'capable of being understood in terms of a contrary world-view' (12). Because of this Hick is concerned to defend the religious experience of the world as rationally defensible against, what he later refers to as a naturalism that has 'created a 'consensus reality' of our culture'. It is, according to the later Hick (1999, 14), a case of naturalism becoming so ingrained in our culture that 'we no longer see it, but see everything else through it'. Such a defence of the religious interpretation led Hick to develop an epistemology that rejected an 'infallibilist' theory of knowledge. This is the traditional rationalist theory with its concern with knowledge as propositional. So, from the rationalist point of view, propositions are true, and therefore, express knowledge claims if they can be shown to be self-evidently or necessarily true. Hick's main criticism of the infallibilist theory is that knowledge is viewed from a vantage point outside of human nature (Hick, 1966, 202). Rather than accepting such a rationalist view of knowledge, Hick takes an empiricist point of view in stating that all human cognition contains an inescapably subjective element. And this leads him to conclude that:

> For knowledge, in the sense of an infallible acquaintance with truth (or reality) does not occur. There is no state or activity of mind called 'knowing', which carries with it an absolute guarantee of freedom from error (Hick 1957, 203).

What is required rather is a 'rational or adequately grounded certitude' (207), which has coherence with our 'mass of experience and belief as a whole'

(205). It is important to point out that Hick is not saying that knowledge is never possible, rather that all claims to knowledge are just that; claims. Knowledge by definition cannot be erroneous but when we say 'know' we actually mean 'I claim to know'. Furthermore it also important to point out at this stage of the argument that despite emphasising a subjective element in human knowing Hick is keen to defend a basic factual nature of religious language. So the statement that 'God exists', whilst it cannot actually be proven, is, nevertheless, saying something *real* about the world; that the human encounter with God is not merely a human projection, in the tradition of Feurbach and later 'non-realists' such as Cupitt and Phillips. Hick's, however, is not a *naïve* realist account, which would maintain that the world is just as we perceive it to be, but a *critical* realist account that there is a significant subjective element in human perception. At the time of writing *Faith and Knowledge* (1957) and *Evil and the God of Love* (1966) Hick was working as a fairly orthodox Christian theologian. The next chapter will consider whether Hick's later pluralist position, which offers a considerably modified view of religious language, actually holds water or whether it suffers, in Flew's famous words, death by a thousand qualifications (Flew 1955). Furthermore, even if it can be shown that the later Hick can maintain his critical realist position, his basic epistemology and his account of religious faith is unlikely to commend itself to a conservative religious world-view of a 'divine being revealing propositional truths to humankind' (Cheetham 2003, 16). The implications of this fact will have to be considered in the discussion about the appropriateness of Hick's work as potentially informing the theory and practice of religious education.

4.5.2 Faith as 'experiencing-as'

It is with such a theory of knowledge that Hick goes on to explain and defend religious belief within the context of the way human beings interpret the world in general. When Hick was studying at Edinburgh University he came under the influence of the Kantian scholar Norman Kemp Smith. It was from Kemp Smith that Hick appreciated Kant's distinction between noumenal reality,

which is not directly experienced, and phenomenal reality, which is experienced by human consciousness. This leads on to the consequent theory that the mind is active in perception so that our perception of the world around us is always part human construction. This is because the impact of our environment is processed by our consciousness in terms of a set of concepts that are necessary for it be unified and make sense to us. Hick states that the effect of this insight was to convince him that our awareness of our environment is always an *interpreted* (my emphasis) awareness (Hick 2001, 2). Later when studying at Oxford under the supervision of H.H. Price, Hick connected Kant's noumenal/phenomenological distinction with Wittgenstein's 'seeing as'. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein had used Jackstrow's duck/rabbit picture, in which it is possible to see the picture as a rabbit's head facing right or a duck's head facing left to argue that all our perception is similarly interpretative. In his doctoral dissertation, which was later published as his first book, *Faith and Knowledge*, Hick takes the idea of 'seeing-as' and expands it to our whole experience of the world. This he refers to as 'experiencing as'. Hick approaches this by describing human experience in terms of various layers of meaning or significance. This can be understood in two possible ways-semantic meaning (the meaning of sentences/propositions etc.) and meaning of an event or situation or life as a whole, which Hick calls practical meaning.

Hick is concerned with second sense of meaning. Firstly we just find ourselves occupying a real world with real objects and other people. These objects present themselves to us in ways that we might refer to as significant. Our experience is not merely one of 'an unpredictable kaleidoscope of chaos and unpredictability but an ordered cosmos in which we live an act and can predict'. At the most basic level our consciousness of the world is one of significance, 'that fundamental and all-pervasive characteristic of our conscious experience which de facto constitutes the experience of 'a world' and not of a merely empty void or churning chaos' (Hick 1957, 98). Such a consciousness of significance involves a judgment either implicit or explicit as to appropriateness of action or range of actions in relation to that environment. This has an essentially pragmatic orientation. We 'select out'

aspects of our environment as significant (99-100). Essentially we have to do this otherwise we would be swamped, bemused and bewildered by the mass of possible sense data. As Hick (1957, 99) states: 'Our sense organs automatically select from nature those aspects in relation to which we must act.'

Hick goes on to apply this use of significance not just to the physical realm of cognition but to the ethical and religious forms of cognition. In order to explain this Hick introduces the concept of freedom. This is an epistemic freedom and we have increasing amounts of this as we move from the physical to the ethical to the religious. In our cognition of the physical environment we have the least freedom. This means that as a species our interpretation of significance is at its most similar in our interpretation of our physical surroundings. This is because our continuing existence depends on interpreting objects correctly. I cannot choose to interpret an on coming juggernaut as a cuddly toy if I want to continue living! So as a species we begin to trust our interpretations and live successfully within our physical environment. As Hick (1957, 107) writes:

> The significance for us of the physical world, nature, is that of an objective environment whose character and 'laws' we must learn, and towards which we have continually to relate ourselves aright if we are to survive.

Superimposed on our experience of the physical world is the significance of our moral world. This is our experience of inter-personal relationships, which is not a separate form of experience but part of our physical experiencing of our environment. However, our freedom to interpret moral situations is greater than our freedom to interpret purely physical objects. For example, I can choose to interpret two youths snatching the handbag of an old lady as one that has moral claims on me, or not. And in terms of a religious experience of the world our freedom is greater still. I can choose to interpret a beautiful landscape or the birth of a baby as the work of a divine creator or I can

choose to see them as simply beautiful and moving elements of an overall naturalistic view of the world with no greater significance than that.

However, the crucial point that Hick is making is that if we do choose to interpret such situations as having to do with God then we are entitled to argue that these are not mere wish fulfilments or human projection but experiences of something real. And if the sceptic asks for evidence we can point to the fact that none of our experiencing of the world can be so evidenced. We cannot prove the existence of the world in such a way because we never experience the world as it is but only through our particular set of conceptual schema. Thus Hick is arguing that religious beliefs are capable of the same warranty as are our other beliefs about the world. Hick's admirer and critic William Alston, who admits that his major work, *Perceiving God*, is heavily influenced by Hick's approach claims this as a masterstroke. He writes:

> The atheistic critique could claim that unless the believer has sufficient independent warrant for the scheme….that scheme is arbitrarily read into experience (but)….One cannot demand an independent warrant for an interpretative scheme of religious experience without in parity, making such a demand for the other areas of experience as well. And since the demand cannot be met anywhere, the logic of the criticism would lead us to reject the epistemic credentials of *all* (my emphasis) experience (Alston 1993, 27-28).

Therefore, according to Hick, all our experience of the world can be described as 'experiencing-as'.

4.5.3 Eschatological verification

However Hick has always been concerned that his argument is still open to the sceptic's objection. The context of this lies within a prevailing philosophy of the early twentieth century, logical positivism: its major claim is that

metaphysical statements (which include religious statements) are essentially meaningless because they are neither analytically true nor empirically verifiable. In other words, if a proposition or statement is to carry meaning then there must be some sort of test to verify its meaning. So what would count as a test for verifying statements like 'God exists' or 'God is love'? The logical positivists claimed on the basis of the verification principle (i.e. that a statement can be said to be meaningful only if it can be shown to be analytically or empirically true) that religious statements basically fail the test. They were not claiming that God does not exist, only that the statement 'god exists' is a statement that has no sense to it; it can neither be verified nor falsified. This is because for a statement to make sense then the truth of it must make a *difference.* Logical positivism eventually became discredited largely because the basis of its claims, the verification principle, failed its own test! As a statement it cannot be shown to be either analytically or empirically true.

Bearing in mind the time when Hick was developing his religious epistemology he was obviously challenged by the verification/falsification debate in the 1950s, which was famously documented in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (1955). This publication brought together a clutch of leading philosophers under the general theme of 'can religion be discussed'? This is not the place to go into detail about this but it is important to mention two particular contributions, which highlight the terms of the debate. The most significant contribution came from Anthony Flew who asked the question whether there were any set of circumstances that would prove the statement 'God exists' to be false. He drew on a famous parable by John Wisdom. Two explorers come upon a clearing in the jungle. In this clearing grew many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says that a gardener must tend the plot. The other disagrees and says there is no gardener. So they pitch their tents and set up a watch. No gardener is seen: 'But' says the first explorer, 'perhaps he is an invisible gardener'. So they set up an electric fence and patrol with bloodhounds. There are still no signs of a gardener, no shrieks on account of the electric fence and no cry from the bloodhounds. 'But' says the believer in the gardener, 'there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible

to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves'. The exasperated sceptic then asks how such a gardener differs from an imaginary gardener or no gardener at all (Flew 1955, 96). Flew goes onto say that theologians have a propensity to behave like the first explorer, constantly qualifying their assertions about the existence of God. Their original statements are eventually killed by 'the death of a thousand qualifications' (97). So what Flew is asking is what difference would it make to the world if there was no God? And if it cannot be shown what difference this makes then religious statements can't constitute genuine assertions.

One kind of response to Flew's challenge is a non-realist response. In the same collection of essays, the Oxford moral philosopher Richard Hare accepted that Flew had shown that truth or falsity of religious statements cannot be factually demonstrated but didn't agree that they are meaningless. He used a peculiar term, *blik*, to try to demonstrate that although religious beliefs may be unverifiable and unfalisifiable they nevertheless can be unshakeable. We may have true or false *bliks* but Hare went on to maintain that nevertheless they cannot said to be meaningless to the holder of such *bliks*. However, the problem with Hare's view is that in order to make a judgement that a *blik* is true or false we are forced to draw on arguments that cannot be said to be cognitively empty.

The calling into question of the cognitivity of religious statements and the non-realist response to this can be traced back in Christian theology to Feuerbach (1804-72) who wrote:

> Religion, at least the Christian, is the relation of man to himself, or more correctly to his own nature (i.e. his subjective nature); but a relation to it, viewed as a nature apart from his own. The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective-i.e. contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being. All the attributes

of the divine nature are, therefore, attributes of the human nature (In Reardon 1966, 96).

More recently, such a view has been expressed by a leading non-realist, Don Cupitt:

God is the religious requirement personified, and his attributes are a kind of projection of its main features as we experience them (Cupitt, 1980, 85).

Cupitt went on to present a television series in the early 1980s, and write a book (Cupitt, 1984) the title of which, *Sea of Faith*, was taken from Matthew Arnold's poem 'Dover Beach' (1867).

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and
Round earth's shore
Lay like folds of a bright girdle furl'd
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long,
Withdrawing roar…

Today the *Sea of Faith Network* exists, in many parts of the world, to promote a non-realist view of religion:

The view that there is nothing beyond or outside human beings, neither God nor some other notion like 'Ultimate Reality', that gives life meaning and purpose. We do that for ourselves (Hart, 1993, 7).

Hick, whilst taking seriously developments in the natural and social sciences that stem from the enlightenment period, nevertheless wants to maintain that religious statements are cognitive; that they refer to something *real.* He is dismissive of the non-realists as being elitist, for their account of religion is 'good news' only for a privileged minority, largely living in the West. This is

because for the majority of human beings, across history and in many parts of the world today, life is a constant struggle against adversity and often miserable and brief. And so the human fulfilment, of which the religions speak, has not been realised in the great majority of human beings (Hick 1989, 207; 1993, 3-16; 1999, 22-25).

This is all very well but a critic may ask, should a 'loving God' allow so much adversity and why does such a God hide Himself from humanity? This is the line taken by Humanist critics, such as Mesle (1991a and 1991b) in criticising Hick's Irenaean theodicy, which is discussed in the next section.

Hick's own response to Flew was to offer a parable of his own. He asks us to imagine two travellers on the same road. One believes the road leads to the Celestial City whilst the other believes that it merely leads to a precipice with nothing beyond. Neither traveller can predict what lies beyond each bend in the road but when they come to the end of the road it will be evident that one of the travellers will be correct. It therefore follows, according to Hick, that the difference between their two beliefs was a genuine one and not a meaningless and empty dispute. He writes (Hick 2001, 5):

> The basic idea is that although the human situation is religiously
> ambiguous from our present standpoint within it, the religions teach
> that its *total structure* (my emphasis) is such that there will be either
> instantly or, more likely, progressively incompatible with a naturalistic
> understanding of the universe.

Of course such a claim can only be eschatologically verifiable and not falsifiable because if such a claim is false there will be nobody to verify it!

The demise of logical positivism has led some, for example, Gillis (1991, 37) to criticise Hick for continuing to argue for the cognitive status of religious statements in the context of the positivist critique of metaphysics. Gillis thinks Hick should abandon this enterprise because it gives too much ground to a discredited principle. Hick replies that although logical positivism is discredited

the challenge to religious believers to show how, for example the statement 'God exists' makes an experienceable difference is still an alive question. He writes (Hick 1991, 51):

> Does not this constitute a fundamental challenge to a realist use of religious language? And how is the challenge to be met, if not in contrasting accounts of the structure or character of the universe as religiously and as naturalistically understood?

He goes on to say that he would be more impressed if critics of eschatological verification offered an alternative solution to 'the valid question which it seeks to answer' (51).

4.5.4 An Irenaean theodicy

The subject of eschatology forms an important part in the next two of Hick's major works, Evil *and the God of Love* (1966) and *Death and Eternal Life* (1976a).

Both arose from key religious questions. The first concerned the problem of evil and the second the question of life after death. Both questions arise naturally from Hick's previous work. Firstly, if it is rational for a person to place trust in his or her religious beliefs as derived from religious experience then, from a Christian point of view, its biggest obstacle is the problem of evil. For how can a Christian claim that 'God is love' in the face of so much natural and moral evil? Hick began to address this issue in lectures during his first spell in America at Cornell University in the late 1950s (Hick 2001, 8) and fully concentrated on it during a sabbatical at Cambridge University during 1963-64. The result of Hick's research was his statement of an Irenaean Theodicy as detailed in *Evil and the God of Love.* This nowadays forms part of every 'A' Level student's study of the problem of evil and is an aspect of his work for which he is world famous. However when similar considerations are applied to other World Religions it forms not only a significant part of his 'religious'

theory of religion but is an original and potentially interesting contribution to the study of religion in religious education.

In *Evil and the God of Love* Hick rejects the 'traditional' theodicy as expressed by Augustine. This is the orthodox Christian belief that human beings were once created perfect and through disobedience to God 'fell' into a permanent state of sin. According to the Augustinian view such a rebellion has resulted not only in human sin but also is responsible for a disordering of the world, which leads to 'natural' evil; 'life preying upon life, diseases, earthquakes, droughts, famines etc' (Hick 2001, 8). Hick believes there are a number of things wrong with such a theory. Firstly, how is it possible for perfect creatures possessing free will to sin? Such a notion is self-contradictory. Even if they are free to sin they will not do so if perfect because if they do choose to sin then they are not perfect after all. And if God is responsible for everything He has created, apart from Himself, then He must, on this view, be responsible for evil. Furthermore 'natural' evil existed before the arrival of human beings and the idea that human beings once existed in a 'perfect state' contradicts what we know about the evolution of life on earth.

Hick therefore looked for a solution the writings of the early Greek Fathers, especially Irenaeus. On this view God created humans as immature creatures at an *epistemic distance* from the creator; in the 'image' of God. So human life is seen as a long evolutionary process in which God intends for humanity to develop spiritually and morally and grow into the 'likeness' of God. This is a two-stage process. In the first stage human beings as *homo sapiens,* although basically rational, personal and moral creatures are, nonetheless, concerned with survival and hence prey to self-centredness and egotism. Such a nature lays human beings open to all kinds of evil and suffering. But, it is the creator's intention that in the second stage of the process He will bring the raw material of *homo sapiens* into a more humanised version of itself and hence into the 'likeness' of its creator characterised by values such as compassion and love for its fellow creatures.

However, such a view is not only teleological but also strongly eschatological. This has to be the case, for not only is it obvious that such a human transformation has not taken place amongst most human beings, even the saints and mahatmas of the various religious traditions are not perfect (Hick 2006, 183) but to claim that God is good and loving demands it. This is because so many of the world's population live in abject poverty and suffering. Only an eschatological view of human life can square such a reality with a loving creator. But what sense can be made of life continuing after death?

4.5.5   Many lives in many worlds

Hick addressed this question in the encyclopaedic *Death and Eternal Life* (1976a). He has also addressed it more recently (Hick 2006, 191-200). *Death and Eternal Life* is notable for the fact that Hick addressed this issue from a wider religious perspective than Christianity alone, incorporating insights from Hinduism and Buddhism; the result of moving to Birmingham as H.G. Wood Professor of Theology in 1967, where he came into contact with people from the wide variety of religious traditions established in the city, and from study trips to Sri Lanka and India.

True to his 'liberal' leanings Hick also made great reference to the naturalistic disciplines of biology, psychology, anthropology, philosophy and parapsychology in this book.

His views on life after death have developed over the years but his basic thesis is as follows. It has already been noted that Hick's arguments in *Evil and the God of Love* demanded an acceptance of human life extending beyond bodily death. But what kind of 'life' will that be? In *Death and Eternal Life* Hick distinguishes between eschatologies (the ultimate 'end' state) and pareschatologies (conceptions of what 'happens' after death and before the 'end state'). For example, the idea of purgatory is completely different from the idea of the reincarnation of a person's karmic structure. On the face of it eschatologies differ too, the 'western Semitic' conception of a continuous heaven/paradise or hell is different from the 'eastern' conception of a series of

'lives' as the result of reincarnation or rebirth. However Hick maintains that such differences in the case of eschatologies are not clear-cut if we consider the mystical traditions of 'western religions'. For example the Sufi conception of *fana* or self noughting echoes the non-theistic advaita vedantic philosophy of Shankara (788-820 CE) where ultimate reality (Brahman) is conceived as an impersonal force of pure consciousness with which the liberated soul will ultimately become one. And on the other hand, within Hinduism, the thought of Ramanuja (1017-1137 CE) considered Brahman to be personal in a theistic sense that can be understood by 'traditional' Christian, Jewish and Muslim belief.

Hick's speculative conclusions on this question owe much to the influence of Hindu and Buddhist thought and to his *Irenaean intuition* (Cheetham 2003, 105). It is, arguably, this latter intuition that drives much of his work on this, and his religious pluralism. The key issue is that if it is, from a religious point of view, rational to argue for the reality of life after death in which the intention is for persons to develop spiritually and morally, then the most coherent scenario is for a *series* of lives each bounded by death. This is necessary, according to Hick, because it is both the concept of epistemic distance and the reality of death that constitute the necessary conditions for person development. And these further lives are likely to take place, not in this world, but other worlds or sub-universes.

There are a number of significant criticisms of Hick's thesis in the light of his Irenaean theodicy. Cheetham (2003, 59-62) raises a number of questions which highlight a number of possible criticisms. For example, is it acceptable to argue for such a universal account when each tradition has its own distinct account? How does Hick's view of many lives bounded by death stand up in the light of gradual spiritual and moral completeness, depending, as it does on an epistemic distance? and isn't Hick's vision too parochial involving as it does only human transformation? In a later part of his book Cheetham (2003, 123-127) calls for a Copernican revolution in eschatology, which extends the vision beyond humanity to a more cosmic scope. However, this is not the place to follow up such criticisms as whilst Hick's Irenaean intuition does

indeed inform his later interpretation of religion it does so not in terms of arguing for a theodicy but in his general understanding of religion as human transformation in response to a transcendental reality. It is this interpretation when understood as a second order explanatory framework that offers rich possibilities for religious education. However this needs to stand up to critical scrutiny, which will be addressed in the next chapter.

In the years that have passed since the publication of *Death and Eternal Life* Hick has become increasingly influenced by Buddhist thought (see for example Hick, 1993, 105-136; 2003, 217-226) and his eschatological vision has become to resemble the idea of rebirth in Buddhism. He writes (Hick 2003, 225):

> My eventual conclusion is that something like the Buddhist conception of rebirth is quite likely to be true. This depends upon a distinction between the present conscious self, which is not immortal but is a temporary and changing expression of a deeper reality, an underlying psychic structure, a dispositional or karmic continuant, which affects and is affected by the activities of the present self, and which will be expressed again many times in new conscious personalities, reflecting a gradual development towards unity with the eternal ultimate reality. These rebirths may not be in this world; there may be many worlds in many universes or sub-universes (see also 2006, 191-200).

Such Buddhist influence is further evidenced by Hick's current position on this and other 'transhistorical' truth claims (see Hick, 1989, 365-376). Despite the vast time and energy that he must have put into producing such a comprehensive (and long!) book as *Death and Eternal Life*, Hick regards such matters agnostically. They are interesting, and important, speculations but are, from our present human point of view, unanswerable. They are, in Buddhist terms, *avyakata*, the undetermined questions. Although he believes that everything we do affects positively or negatively our present and future dispositional state, as to the 'end point' we, 'at present neither know nor need to know' (Hick 1999, 249). What is important is that we know how to live now

(Hick 1999, 254): 'This is the way of love, witnessed by the saints and mystics of all the great traditions.'

4.5.6 Religious pluralism

I have already noted that Hick's move to Birmingham in 1967 was the catalyst for is interest in non-Christian religions. Hick's inaugural lecture in the H.G.Wood chair of theology at the University of Birmingham addressed his on-going concerns with the realist- non-realist debate, the ideas of verification and falsification, the coherence of the concept of God and the problem of evil. However, at the end of the lecture he mentioned one more 'great challenge' to Christians, namely 'the conflicting truth claims of the different world religions' (Hick 1973, 16). For if it is rational for him, as a Christian, to argue for the reality of God, based on religious experience then is it not equally rational for the Hindu, Buddhist, Jew etc. to argue likewise? Furthermore our identities as Christians, Jews etc. appear to be, largely, the consequence of being born in a particular time and place. For, he argues, if he had been born in India he would probably have been a Hindu, if in Egypt a Muslim, if in Sri Lanka a Buddhist. But he was born in England and so is, predictably, a Christian. In his lecture Hick makes the significant point that he is concerned that such an issue is 'squarely faced' and not evaded in a non-realist way.

It is important to point out, however, that Hick's interest in inter-faith issues and questions stemmed from new experiences rather than new thoughts (Hick 1993b, 141). Involving himself in a variety of organisations committed to good relations between people of different faiths and ethnicity, Hick got to know people from a variety of backgrounds and spent time in mosques, synagogues, gurdwaras and mandirs. (see Hick 2003, 159-192). Such experiences led Hick to, what was for him at the time, a profound insight;

> something very important dawned on me. On the one hand all the
> externals were different. In a Hindu temple, for example, the sights, the
> sounds, the smells, the colours were those of India and I could imagine

myself (after I had been in India) back there. And not only the externals, but also the languages, the concepts, the scriptures, the traditions are all different and distinctive. But at a deeper level it seemed evident to me that essentially the same thing was going on in all these different places of worship, namely men and women were coming together under the auspices of some ancient, highly developed tradition which enables them to open their minds and hearts 'upwards' towards a higher divine reality which makes a claim on the living of their lives (Hick 2003, 160).

Thus for the next twenty years of his academic career Hick devoted his time to grappling with the consequences of this insight for Christian theology and the philosophy of religion. In 1973 he produced a collection of writings called *God and the Universe of Faiths* in which he called for a Copernican revolution in theology. The Copernican revolution in astronomy consisted in a change of perspective in how humans understood the universe and their place in it. It consisted in a shift from the idea that the earth is the centre of the universe to the realisation that it is the sun that lies at the centre with all the planets, including earth, revolving around it. Hick's revolution in theology involved a shift from viewing Christ at the centre to seeing God at the centre.

This initial theory has undergone a great deal of criticism and has resulted in Hick gradually refining it over a period of time. Early criticisms (see especially D'Costa 1987) attacked Hick's conception of God as being, essentially Christian, with the idea of God as loving creator, and hence an inadequate basis on which to build a hypothesis of religious pluralism. Hick saw the force in this argument and changed his terminology to talk of the *Real*, which is ineffable and transcategorial. He revisited Kantian epistemology and distinguished between the Real *an sich* and the Real as humanly conceived by the conceptual lenses of each tradition. He referred repeatedly (See for example Hick 1989, 153; 2001, 15) to Aquinas's epistemological principle: 'Thing's known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower.' So the Real *an sich* is neither personal nor impersonal but only so in the humanly conceived absolutes of each tradition. Such a hypothesis (repeatedly

criticised as potentially undermining his claim that religious language is cognitive) allows Hick to make the claim that each major religious tradition is a more or less equally valid, though different, response to the Real: and as such equally valid, and equally invalid- in the sense that all traditions display aspects of themselves that are, according to Hick, 'infected by human greed, cruelty, pride and selfishness' (Hick 1999, 17). As valid, religious traditions may be seen as 'vehicles' of human 'salvation' that enable human transformation from self-centredness to reality centredness. This is Hick's soteriological criterion and it is this that enables him to make this claim. He points to what St Paul refers to as the 'fruits of the spirit' which enable the 'production' of saints:

> The production of saints, contemplative and practical, individualistic and political, is thus one valid criterion by which to identify a religious tradition as a salvific human response to the Real (Hick 1989, 307).

The most developed form of Hick's hypothesis is found in his Gifford Lectures published in 1989 as *An Interpretation of Religion*. Such was the quality and impact of this work that Hick received the Grawemeyer Award for significant new thinking in religion. It has rightly been described as a *tour de force* (Cheetham 2003, 4) and judiciously integrates his earlier epistemological concerns with his concern to articulate an explanatory hypothesis on religious pluralism. The sustainability of this is a major issue for Hick's critics and it is one that will be dealt with fully in the next chapter. However, less emphasised but equally significant in terms of the potential of Hick's work to illuminate approaches to RE is the consistent presence of his Irenaean intuition.

4.5.6.1   Hick's Irenaean Intuition

In *An Interpretation of Religion* Hick states that attempts to define religion as a generic term are doomed to failure. He believes it is much better to study religions in their particularity and then describe them: In other words to take an inductive approach to religious experience, as it were, from the ground up.

In so doing we can then discover if they have anything in common. Religions are, according to Hick, like members of the same family, similar in many ways but not the same in all ways. For example, there may be similarities between Christianity and Buddhism: they share the concept of worship. However, worship does not mean the same in Christianity as it does in Buddhism, not least because of the Christian belief in God and for Buddhists the existence or not of God is one of Buddha's undetermined questions, the answer to which is not necessary for a Buddhist to achieve nibbana and hence not soteriologically significant.

According to Hick, the most important thing that religions have in common is that they provide an analysis of human unsatisfactoriness or incompleteness. It is possible to identify key ideas, beliefs or concepts that express a particular religious tradition's analysis of human nature. Interestingly whilst these concepts are different they all point to the belief that there is something basically unsatisfactory or incomplete about being human. This is Hick's Irenaean intuition at work.

It has already been noted that from a Christian perspective an Irenaean approach to theodicy results in a conception of human beings as part of a two stage evolutionary process. In *An Interpretation of Religion* and, subsequently in *The Fifth Dimension*, Hick develops this idea in terms of the other major religious traditions (Hick 1989, 36-55; 1999, 55-73).

For Muslims humans are incomplete because of *ghafala* (forgetfulness of Allah) and for Jews because of *yetzer ha-ra* (humans' innate inclination to do evil in a precarious life where survival is our pre-occupation). For Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists the 'natural' human state is one of *avidya* (ignorance). Misguided by *maya* (illusion) humans are attached to the world of becoming which is *samsara*. For Buddhists such ignorance is the cause of *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness) due to *tanha* (craving). For Sikhs it is *haumai* (human self-centredness).

However, according to this view, religions don't just provide an analysis of human nature but also provide a path, or way of living, which enables human beings to transcend this imperfect state and so enter a state, which is believed to be more truly human. If we look at this in terms of the religious traditions, Hick's theory is emphasising that what is common between the religions is that they provide the means for humans to transcend incompleteness and so become more fully human. Hick refers to this generally as 'cosmic optimism'. However, there is no attempt to say that the Buddhist view of human nature and destiny is the same as the Christian, for example. Each religion differs as to what that goal consists in but what they have in common, according to Hick, is this cosmic optimism and, hence, salvific efficacy.

It is the contention of this thesis that it is the Irenaean element in Hick's hypothesis that is potentially illuminating for religious education. The profession has benefited from an understanding of religion in RE informed by Jackson's work in ethnography (1997). Drawing on the work of Cantwell Smith he has shown us that we need to go beyond a version of phenomenology that reifies religions into 'belief systems'. Instead an interpretive approach based on anthropology and hermeneutics can give us a more realistic understanding of religious traditions. However, Hick takes Cantwell Smith's insights further, which may enable us to take the notion of religious education being an interpretive activity further. Rather than just interpreting religious traditions *per se* pupils will be interpreting life with the aid of insights from the religions understood as vehicles of human transformation. Such an approach may enable them to gain a better insight into what we might call the *religiousness* of each of the religious traditions and, arguably, the human condition in a religiously ambiguous world.

To begin to illustrate how Hick's thinking can inform conceptions of religious education, I will end this chapter by quoting from sources, spanning a period of thirty three years, and which whet the appetite for both the exciting possibilities but also the difficult questions that John Hick's work poses when an attempt is made to apply it to religious education

The first quotation comes from God and the Universe of Faiths (1973, 101) the second from *A Rainbow of Faiths* (1993) and the third from *The New Frontier of Religion and Science* (2006):

> The notion of religions as mutually exclusive entities with their own characteristics and histories, although it now tends to operate as a habitual category of our thinking, may well be but another example of the illicit reification, the turning of good adjectives into bad substantives, to which the western mind is prone and against which contemporary philosophy has armed us. In this case a powerful but false conceptuality has helped to create phenomena answering to it, namely the religions of the world seeing themselves and each other as rival ideological communities.

Rather, it is better, according to Hick, to see the great religious traditions as 'different but (so far as we can tell) equally valid human responses to the ultimate reality that is the ground and source of everything and the condition of our highest good' (1993, 139). When viewed in this way:

> We have no reason to restrict ourselves to the spiritual resources of our own tradition. This is our home ground; but just as a citizen of the United States, or Britain, or France, or Japan or any other country, can become a better informed and more open-minded citizen, through travel abroad, learning other languages, reading other literatures, contact with other cultures, so also in the realm of the spirit (1993, 139).

And the possible implications of the above are described as follows:

> Now while one cannot belong simultaneously to two organisations with mutually exclusive memberships, one *can* live within two or more overlapping spheres of spiritual influence. The same person can respond to the wisdom and can use some of the spiritual practices-

such as different forms of prayer and meditation-that come from a variety of sources; and indeed many, and probably a growing number of us today, are doing just that. In this model of religion the institutions have an important function in preserving historic memories and providing communal symbols and rituals……while religious institutions almost inevitably divide humanity, the inner openness to the Ultimate that I am calling spirituality, or mysticism, does not split people into opposing groups. Spirituality does indeed take characteristically different forms within the different traditions, but these differences are complementary rather than contradictory (2006, 37-38).

4.6 Conclusion

In presenting an overview of Hick's work to date I have attempted to illustrate not only how interesting it is, driven, as Cheetham noted by genuine problems that face human beings but also how it is not possible to offer a fair and balanced critique of any of these topics without at least some understanding of how each has developed out of another. Good examples of this include the remarkable consistency of Hick's epistemology of faith right through from *Faith and Knowledge* (1957) until the present day and how Hick's interpretation of religion as human transformation in response to a transcendent reality has grown out of his Irenaean intuition first articulated in *Evil and the God of Love* (1966), developed further in (1976a) and blossoming into full fruition in *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989).

At present all that I have been able to do is sketch briefly such major themes in Hick's work. However if a case is to be made that Hick's religious interpretation of religion can make a constructive contribution to a distinctive interpretation of religious education, such a religious interpretation of religion must be able to stand up to critical scrutiny. This is the subject of the next chapter.

5. Hick's interpretation of a religiously pluralistic understanding of religion

5.1 Introduction

Having argued that any critic of Hick needs to have an understanding and appreciation of how his whole body of work fits together I now turn to consider Hick's most prominent critics. As mentioned in the previous chapter there are some theological areas, such as Hick's writings on Christology, that fall outside my main concern here so I will concentrate on his religiously pluralistic understanding of religion. In so doing I intend to establish my hypothesis that Hick's interpretation of religion as human transformation in response (consciously or unconsciously) to a transcendent reality stands up to critical scrutiny as a second order interpretative framework of religion.

5.2 Methodology

Considering Hick's vast and varied output in his dual role as Christian theologian and philosopher of religion, the question that immediately presents itself, is, how can one present a critical analysis of such a wide variety of work in one chapter? The problem with which we are presented is that of dealing with Hick's work, usually the subject of a whole thesis, within one chapter of a broader thesis on religious education. In order to achieve this effectively, it is necessary to outline a clear methodology.

As I noted in the previous chapter, any appraisal of Hick's work must take into account his whole output. For the purposes of this chapter I shall concentrate on his account of the nature of religion in the context of religious diversity. This is not a contradiction as one doesn't need to survey his whole output to achieve such a task; it is important however, to be aware of it and consider it when appropriate. The task I have set myself will inevitably lead to an

appraisal of his pluralist hypothesis but it is what Hick says about the nature of religion that is most significant for the religious educator. Emerging from a Judeo-Christian framework Hick proposes a global philosophy of religion. However, he is not proposing a global religion; i.e. that all religions are essentially the same. This would be a first-order claim about the diversity of the world's religions. Rather Hick is proposing a second-order philosophical *explanation* or meta-narrative (Cheetham 2003, 132-133) about the transcendental unity of all religions but within such transcendental unity, 'each tradition will continue in its concrete particularity as its own unique response to the Real' (Hick 1995, 30).

Twiss (1990, 533) points out that Hick's thesis is significant for philosophers of religion in a discipline that is becoming increasingly cross cultural and comparative. Concomitantly such a thesis is also significant for a religious education that seeks to have as its basis for study, a variety of religious traditions with the aim of enabling pupils not only to learn about such religions but to learn from them. For if one is to learn from a religion as a part of a publicly funded education system then it must be assumed that there is something of value in the content to be learned from. Not only that but, arguably, there must also be something distinctive about the subject matter that differentiates a *religious* education from, say, sociology, anthropology or history. Thus it is argued that if Hick's theory of religions is tenable then it has the potential positively to inform conceptions of religious education.

As mentioned in the introduction to the thesis, Hick's theory has generated a great deal of critical comment in both academic journals and full length books. Many of these criticisms are, of course overlapping. The problem faced in this chapter is that these critical readings are often incompatible, even contradictory in terms of the theory's conceptual and epistemological nature (Twiss 1990, 533). For example Hick has been accused by some of being a modernist in the sense that critics accuse him of proposing a cognitive meta-theory that is a form of Western cultural imperialism (For example: Netland 1991 and Surin 1990). On the other hand Hick has been accused of proposing a non-cognitive, anti-realist, post-modern, relativist account (For

example: Griffiths and Lewis 1983; Cooling 2003). As Cheetham (2003, 159) points out: 'So, Hick finds himself caught between critics who accuse him of denying the possibility of religious claims and reducing them all down to a relative status, and (postmodern) critics who accuse him of proposing a modernist or absolutist meta-narrative that eliminates real diversity, relativity and difference.'

Much of this divergence is as a consequence of Hick's writings as both a Christian theologian and as a philosopher of religion; for example many of the most strident criticisms come from conservative Christian theologians. However, the main reason for this, and this presents the greatest challenge, is that, as already pointed out, whilst Hick's interest in developing a theory of a pluralist conception of religion began when he arrived in Birmingham in the 1970s, it did not develop 'out of the blue' so to speak, but included insights from his earlier work. For example, his epistemology of religious faith as outlined in part three of *An Interpretation of Religion* (Hick 1989, 129-230) has its origins in the earlier *Faith and Knowledge* (1957). So Hick's theory is 'a rich organic web of more than one theoretical strand' (Twiss 1990, 534). Consequently it is a mistake, 'for critics to focus on one aspect of his thinking and pursue it as if it is the only thing he has to say on the matter' (Cheetham 2003, 134).

5.3   Potential tensions in Hick's theory

As I have previously noted, Hick seeks to outline a religious but not a confessional interpretation of religion in all its plurality of forms. (Hick 1989, 1). The basic premises of his argument are as follows. Firstly there is the epistemological argument that it is reasonable to believe that religious experience as is manifest in different forms in various parts of the world is not purely human projection but a response to a transcendent reality. Following Wittgenstein he argues for religion as a family resemblance concept in which there is no common essence. However, Hick draws on Tillich's concept of 'ultimate concern' and moves towards Cantwell Smith's 'transcendentology' to

seek a defining characteristic. This is important for Hick because the transcendent dimension helps define religion in a religious as opposed to naturalistic way and so counteracts a non-realist account. So although Hick interprets religions as culturally conditioned pragmatic forms of life, he also maintains that there is an actual ontologically real divine source that exists 'out there' and to which religious beliefs and doctrines refer. Moreover each religious tradition's beliefs and practices provide meaningful ways for the spiritual transformation of adherents from self to reality centredness, which manifests itself in dispositions, or spiritual fruits, such as love and compassion. Finally Hick argues, that as far as we can tell the major world faiths when judged by the criterion of 'by their fruits shall ye know them', are equally salvific.

It is widely recognised that the final premise (above) is highly controversial yet laying this aside for a moment, we are nevertheless confronted with a tension. Hick appears to be attempting to hold together two potentially conflicting theories of religion. On the one hand he is arguing for religion to be understood in a *cultural-linguistic* way, which gives primacy to religious practice, yet on the other hand he is arguing for a *propositional-realist* account, which gives primacy to religious belief (Lindbeck 1984). Such a tension can explain the apparent contradictory critiques outlined above. So, for example, if Hick's theory is read as a cultural linguistic theory then this opens the way for those who wish to accuse him of being, at least, a closet anti-realist. On the other hand, those who read his theory as a propositionalist realist account feel justified in accusing him of not only downgrading the cognitive status of religions' claims to truth but essentially 'obliterating the differences between the religions' (Hick 1995: 39) and hence being guilty of a form of Western cultural imperialism.

Notwithstanding this, however, it can be argued that Hick is not seeking to be defined by such categories. After all his *Interpretation of Religion* received the Grawemeyer Award for *new* religious thinking. Whilst it is true that Hick's conception of religious faith argues for the primacy of religious experience and regards theological formulations, doctrine and the idea of faith as

propositional revelatory as secondary and humanly constructed, he argues forcefully for the rationality of belief in the existence of an ontologically real transcendent reality. To say that putting primacy on religious experience that is culturally conditioned can lead to anti-realist conceptions of religion which then makes it difficult to argue for a real transcendent reality about which religious belief makes potentially conflicting cognitive claims is not an argument to dismiss Hick's innovative thinking. His thinking is, however, controversial and substantial criticisms of his ideas need to be taken seriously; as they are, incidentally by Hick himself (See for example Hick, 1995; 2001). It is necessary therefore firstly to outline the various stages of his argument whilst at the same time considering major criticisms. It will then be illuminating to attempt to analyse what type of theory of religions Hick is proposing.

5.4   Hick's pluralist theory of religion: epistemological foundations

5.4.1   The rationality of religious belief: Critical Realism

Hick has always sought to defend the rationality of religious belief in the face of a religiously ambiguous universe. He bases his argument on an empiricist interpretation of religious faith. It is perfectly rational, according to Hick, for a person who experiences the world as lived in the presence of the transcendent to interpret the world religiously in a first- order kind of way. However, any philosophical explanation of the world, as it is actually experienced by people in total, has to admit that we inhabit, from an explanatory point of view, an ambiguous universe. So consequently it is perfectly rational to interpret the universe from a naturalistic standpoint. In *An Interpretation of Religion* (Hick 1989, 73-125) Hick explores the traditional theistic 'proofs' and the naturalistic response and concludes that the universe is ambiguous in as much as in some aspects it invites, whilst in others it repels, a religious response and that it is not possible from an philosophical explanatory point of view to adjudicate between them. So, he concludes that

both religious and naturalistic responses to our experience of the world are rational.

Hick is able to argue for the rationality of a religious interpretation because he adopts a critical realist epistemology. Basing his position on the empiricist philosophical tradition, Hick argues that we can never experience the world or reality as it actually is, for our senses are fallible. Not only that but we are not equipped as humans to detect everything there is about the universe. We only hear a small part of the sound scale, for example. Indeed many of the entities postulated by modern science are unobservable by the senses; such things as genes, viruses, black holes, and most forms of electromagnetic radiation (Ladyman 2002, 129). According to Hick, as humans have evolved their senses have been fine tuned to detect only those aspects of the total environment that are needed for humankind to survive and flourish. Furthermore if we did not have this cognitive filter then human life would be impossible because we would be bombarded with so much sensory data.

In the development of the philosophy of science a distinction has been made between *primary* and *secondary* properties. This goes back, according to Ladyman (134), as far as the ancient Greek atomists who thought things only *seem* to be what there are; for example something that we regard as sweet to the taste or cold to the touch. Primary properties are those properties that things not only appear to have but also have in reality. Secondary properties are those which things appear to have but don't possess in themselves, only in the mind of the observer. So for example, the colour of a table or the taste of food are not primary but secondary qualities of those things. However in the seventeenth century Berkeley argued that the idea of primary properties is an unprovable assumption. According to Berkeley primary properties are supposed to be stable whereas secondary properties are perceptually relative. However, we cannot *know* that primary properties are really stable only that they are stable relative to our perceptual make up. So from this perspective of *idealism* we can only know the contents of our own consciousness.

Hick is keen to counter this position by drawing on Hume who argued that we believe in the reality of the existence of a mind-independent external world because it is within our nature to do so not through philosophical justification, which is not possible. Hick goes on to quote G.E. Moore when he wrote, 'we *know* many things that we cannot *prove*' (Hick 2006, 127).

Hence the critical realist position argues that there exists a real mind-independent external world but which we experience only through the cognitive apparatus provided by our senses. Hick refers to this as *critical trust*. In other words 'we accept what appears to be there as being there, except when we have reason to doubt it' (Hick 2006, 129). So this position is always open to revision but remains 'part of our working definition of sanity' (2006, 130). So the concept of critical trust can be applied to our everyday experience of the world but can it be applied to our religious experience of the world?

5.4.2 Meaning: 'experiencing as'

Having adopted a critical realist position Hick goes on to discuss how we experience the universe and how we derive meaning from it. Essential to Hick's position is his concept of 'experiencing-as'. This, according to Gillis (1991, 43) is Hick's most important contribution to religious epistemology and although criticised will outlive its author and his critics.

Hick takes the basic critical realist position as outlined above and relates it to Wittgenstein's notion of 'seeing as'. I described this in the previous chapter pointing out that Hick takes the idea of 'seeing-as' and expands it to our whole experience of the world, which he refers to as 'experiencing as'. So humans experience the world in terms of various layers of meaning or significance-the physical, moral and religious- each of which builds on a previous level. There is no need to repeat the detail of his argument here.

This account of layers of meaning is essential to Hick's justification of the rationality of religious belief. If we choose to interpret our experience of the world religiously then we are entitled to argue that these are not mere wish fulfilments or human projection but experiences of something real. And as we noted in the previous chapter, when quoting from Alston's support of Hick on this matter (Alston 1993, 27-28), Hick is able to meet the sceptic head on because the critical realist principle argues that even though there might be greater disagreement and less uniformity of interpretation at the religious level of meaning, it cannot be seen to be a fallacious interpretation because *all* of our experience of the world contains a subjective interpretative element to it.

5.4.3   If a religious interpretation is rational why not argue in support of it?

Having made such a robust case for the rationality of a religious interpretation of the universe, Badham (1991, 90-97) questions why Hick is reluctant to 'take sides' and follow his argument further to argue for the greater probability of a religious interpretation over a naturalistic interpretation. As Badham notes, in most academic disciplines we commonly use rational arguments that stop short of proof to arrive at conclusions we believe to be rationally justified even when no universal agreement exists. Hick maintains (1989, 123) that it is not possible to evaluate the relative weight of evidence for and against a religious or naturalistic interpretation. Badham (1991, 94) on the other hand states: 'There is no other area of human concern where all rational people would not admit to a duty to attempt to make an informed judgment on the pros and cons.' He provides examples such as Marxism versus liberal democracy, the pros and cons of abortion, and the use or otherwise of nuclear power to illustrate his point that on such issues although there is no consensus, 'few would be willing to accept that no reasoned choice could be made'.

It is important to outline Badham's criticism as it illustrates a thread of criticism of Hick's work throughout many aspects of his whole hypothesis; namely the impression that Hick is reluctant to take sides.

In answer to this particular point Hick (1991, 105) maintains his argument that from our humanly limited standpoint the universe can be construed by reasonable people in both religious and naturalistic ways, the principle evidence being that reasonable people do *in fact* interpret the universe in different ways. It would seem clear from what we know of Hick that as a deeply religious person he would argue that from his point of view the universe is experienced religiously and for him this is the best way to experience it. But he is not writing from this perspective and, it may be added, not really writing as a theologian here, but as a philosopher. This point will need to be made again when discussing in greater detail the kind of hypothesis Hick is actually proposing. In the meantime it is important to stress that Hick's intention here is to establish a second order explanatory framework and from such a standpoint it must be appropriate not to take sides on the issue of the ambiguity of the universe.

Of course if it is argued that religious faith is based on experience and that it is rational, this raises the question of the plurality of religious experience.

5.4.4 Religions as culturally conditioned but making cognitive claims about the Real.

Hick's account of the nature of religion took a revolutionary step from 1967 onwards, the year in which he moved to Birmingham to become H.G. Wood Professor of Theology. I noted in the previous chapter how it was the *experience* of visiting non Christian places of worship, meeting admirable people of various faiths and generally living and working in a large multi cultural city had a profound effect on Hick's theology and philosophical perspective. At the end of his inaugural lecture in 1973 Hick referred to the 'great challenge' facing Christians as the conflicting truth claims of the different world religions (Hick 1973, 16). So, if it is rational for a Christian believer to argue for a religious interpretation of the universe then is it not equally rational for the Hindu, Buddhist, Jew etc. to argue likewise?

Again as noted in the previous chapter, for the next twenty years of his academic career Hick devoted his time to grappling with the consequences of this insight for Christian theology and the philosophy of religion. In *God and the Universe of Faiths* (1973) Hick outlined his Copernican revolution, which argued it should be God who is at the centre of the religious universe rather than Christianity; and by extension any other religion. So theology should move away from *Christo*centrism to *theo*centricism. Echoing Kuhn's work in the philosophy of science, this represented a paradigm shift in Christian theology. However, being always alert to and sensitive towards critical responses to his work, Hick developed his thesis between the publication of *God and the Universe of Faiths* and *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989) to make yet another shift from *theo*centrism to, what D'Costa (1991, 5) calls *Realo*centricism. Hick had obviously been aware of critics like D'Costa (1987) who noted that whilst Hick might have removed Christ from the centre of the religious universe the 'God' who replaced him is still, essentially, the Christian conception of a creator God of unlimited goodness. In other words Hick's God of the 1973 version of his Copernican revolution had the attributes that Christians associate with God. Hick seems to accept this and has many times since argued (See for example his response to Badham 1991, 104) that it is not appropriate to talk of God at the centre, even with D'Costa's criticism in mind, because for westerners, in particular, the term God evokes the notion of a personal deity which would exclude impersonal conceptions of the transcendent as understood in Buddhism and some forms of Hinduism.

So given that Hick's initial revolution proved to be an inadequate basis on which to build a hypothesis of religious pluralism he changed his terminology to talk of the Real, which is ineffable and transcategorial. Such a hypothesis (repeatedly criticised as potentially undermining his claim that religious language as cognitive) allows Hick to make the claim that each major religious tradition is a more or less equally valid, though different, response to the Real.

It is these developments of Hick's thought that have come under the greatest criticism because they are the elements that are essential to his argument if his account of religion is to be judged viable and acceptable. It is important

therefore to discuss each aspect in greater detail and also offer some response to the many criticisms.

5.5   Hick's pluralist theory of religion: key areas for criticism.

5.5.1   The ineffability of the 'Real'

If it is rational for a Christian, as Hick was originally doing, to argue for a religious interpretation of the universe lived in the presence of God, then it must be rational for the Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh as much as it is for the Christian, Jew or Muslim. That being the case then what do we say about the obvious fact that each tradition offers differing and conflicting claims about the transcendent? At the most obvious level Christians, Jews and Muslims, for example conceptualise God as essentially personal, whereas the Brahman of advaita Vedanta or Dharmakaya and Sunyata of Buddhism are impersonal. Does this mean however, that although Hick's experience of the different faiths experienced in his visits to places of worship in Birmingham, tells him that behind all the ritual and symbolism something essentially the same was going on (Hick 2003, 160) and that his meeting with impressive representatives of different faiths suggested to him that by ethical criteria it was impossible to say that one tradition is superior to another, the reality of the quite radically different conceptions of the Real means that not all of them can be true?

Here Hick revisits the critical realist perspective; particularly the Kantian conception of the *noumenal*; the reality that exists 'beyond' us, is mind independent of which we are not aware of *as it is in itself*, unobserved and the *phenomena*; that same reality *as it appears to us* by which the innate structure of the human mind is able to bring the impacts of that reality to consciousness as the phenomenal world (Hick 2006, 138). Consequently he is able to distinguish between the Real *an sich* and the Real as humanly conceived by the conceptual lenses of each tradition. So the Real *an sich* is in traditional Christian language ineffable but Hick prefers the term transcategorial. So that which is ineffably Real is beyond human conceptualising yet is known to us in both its personal and impersonal

humanly conceived absolutes of each tradition. So the God of Christianity, the Allah of Islam, the Jahweh of Judaism and the Krishna of bhakti Hinduism are examples of the *personae* of the Real, whereas the Brahman of advaitic Hinduism, the sunyata of northern Buddhism are examples of the *impersonae* of the Real.

Hick provides many illustrations to support his idea of a transcategorial Real from both eastern and western traditions. For example the Hindu advaitic distinction between *nirguna* Brahman, without attributes, name or form, and *saguna* Brahman, which is the same reality as humanly conceived and experienced as God in many forms. In the Sufi tradition Kwaja Abdullah Ansari says in *The Bezels of Wisdom*: 'The Essence, as being beyond all these relationships, is not a divinity….it is we who make Him a divinity by being that through which He knows himself as Divine. Thus he is not known [as God] until we are known.' It might be argued that such conceptions privilege a mystical conception of the transcendent over and above what we might call a 'mainstream' conception. Hick would argue that this may be true in the cases of Islam and Judaism, for example, but such ideas are considered as 'mainstream' in the eastern traditions as well as both the eastern and western churches in Christianity. To support his point Hick quotes a number of great orthodox theologians including Augustine: 'God transcends even the mind' (all examples Hick 2006, 164-165: see also Hick 2000).

The key question of course is what is the relationship between the Real *an sich* and the Real as humanly conceived and experienced? If the Real *an sich* is beyond human categorising how do we know the phenomenal manifestations of the Real as actually that? Is it that the Real *an sich causes* the human conceptions of itself? If that is argued then Hick has a problem in as much as his philosophy falls foul of the same criticism of Kant's epistemology. For if the noumenal world is outside our cognitive repertoire it follows that the concept of cause is part of the phenomenal world and hence makes no sense when applied to a reality of which humanly conceived attributes cannot be used (See for example Sinkinson 2001). Hick's response to this epistemological problem is to say that the Real is not an agent causing

the many different images that history records. Rather there is an inbuilt human capacity to 'be aware of the universal presence of the Transcendent, in virtue of its immanence within our own nature-indeed to some traditions an inner unity with the Transcendent-which is however, always *manifested* [my emphasis] in particular culturally and historically conditioned ways' (Hick 2006, 164. See also Hick 2004, xxix). But what status does the word manifested have here? Is Hick admitting to divine activity or merely a growing awareness on the part of human beings to something beyond them (Sinkinson 2001, 146)? By using the word manifested is Hick guilty, as Sinkinson appears to suggest, of, 'smuggling causality in with terms like 'influence' or 'revelation''? The logic of applying the Kantian *nouemenal/phenomenological* distinction has a price for theology, according to Sinkinson (148), in that revelation is impossible not only because direct knowledge of the Transcendent is impossible but also because the Transcendent cannot in any way, that we can know or describe, influence or affect the world of appearances. Writing in response to his critics in a new preface to *An Interpretation of Religion* Hick (2004, xxix) doesn't use the term manifested and prefers the terms *resonates*, *impacts*, *produces* and *grounds*, which he claims 'are all metaphors in an area in which we have no entirely appropriate language'.

Nevertheless, Hick's dilemma here lies in his postulation of a transcendent reality that must exist to support his hypothesis but as it exists *in itself* is neither personal nor impersonal, nor possessing of any substantial concepts by which religious traditions describe it. So is there anything significant to say about the Real? For if the reason for postulating the Real *an sich* is that it is the best hypothesis to explain the veracity of religious claims and to make the global religious situation intelligible-i.e. that they are not mere illusions as the naturalist would have it and that the various traditions are equally, on the evidence of their spiritual fruits, salvific- (Hick 2000, 41) how can it be the best hypothesis if we can say nothing about it; that it is *absolutely* transcategorial or ineffable?

Is there not a problem here that by saying the Real is absolutely transcategorial Hick is actually saying something about it? Hick admits that he is saying something here but nothing significant, with regard to his hypothesis, follows from it. He distinguishes between *formal* and *substantial* attributes. Substantial attributes tell us something about the Real such as that it is personal or impersonal. Formal attributes do not tell us anything about what the Real is like. A formal attribute such as, that the Real is capable of being referred to, does not give us any information about the Real's nature. Formal attributes are, 'thus trivial or inconsequential in that nothing significant follows from them concerning the intrinsic nature of the Godhead' (Hick 2000, 41).

There are several potential problems with this. Firstly William Rowe (1999) presents a logical objection. Hick's point is that the Real *an sich* cannot be said to be personal or impersonal because these are attributes that apply to our experience of the Real. The Real *an sich* is not the sort of thing that can have any of our humanly conceived substantial attributes, as the number two cannot be said to be either green or non-green. Rowe (1999, 147-148), however says:

> My response to this argument is that even though to ask whether the number two is green or non-green may be to presuppose that it's an entity of the kind that could be green or non-green, and would thus be an inappropriate or senseless question if asked by someone who knows that no number can be green, it hardly follows that the proposition that the number two is non-green is false or in some way meaningless. Indeed, the proposition that the number two is non-green is necessarily true. And it is precisely because every number two must be non-green that it would make no sense for someone who is aware of that fact to ask whether the number two is green or non-green.

Applying this to Hick's hypothesis Rowe states that if the Real cannot possibly be personal because it is not the kind of thing that can be personal then it is clearly non-personal. This, according to Rowe, has either of two serious

consequences for Hick. Either if God is non-personal then it follows that the theistic religions are in error, or if the Real is non-personal because these personal and non-personal attributes cannot be applied to the Real, then nothing significant follows regarding its nature. It is, in Sinkinson's words, *The Unknown God of Pluralism* (Sinkinson 2001, 137-157). Hick's response is to reaffirm that such attributes are indeed not applicable to the Real as they hold only within the domain to which concepts apply (Hick 2000, 43). Furthermore: 'To deny-as in effect Rowe does-that there can be a reality beyond the scope of human conceptuality seems to me to be a dogma that we are under no obligation to accept.'

Insole (2000) takes the argument over formal and substantial attributes further by questioning where the line is drawn between the two. In *An Interpretation of Religion* Hick states that although the Real *an sich* cannot be said to possess the characteristics displayed by its manifestations, such as love, justice, consciousness or bliss, it is nevertheless the noumenal ground of these characteristics. So the heavenly Father of Christianity and the Brahman of Hinduism are 'two authentic manifestations of the Real' (Hick 1989, 247). According to Insole, Hick is here either making a substantial claim about the Real which he claims cannot be done, or he considers such a statement as purely formal.

Insole then goes on to suggest that Hick's formal attributes are so wide and permissive that he can see no reason to exclude such properties such as 'being good' and 'being exclusively revealed in Christ' (Insole 2000, 27). So 'being two authentic manifestations of the Real and 'being exclusively revealed in Christ' each 'look equally formal or substantial (depending how one carves up these categories), the difference being one of substantial theological or metaphysical opinion' (Insole 2000, 27). Insole accuses Hick of placing substantial attributes with which he agrees into the 'formal' class and those with which he disagrees into the 'substantial' class. Ironically, according to Insole, we have to know more about a subject in order to apply a formal attribute to it than we do to ascribe a substantial property. This is because the formal properties that one applies to the Real emerge from substantial

metaphysical beliefs and claims about God. Hick (1989, 247) makes use of Aquinas in his argument by stating: 'Aquinas was emphatic that we cannot know what the divine super-analogue of goodness is like: "we cannot grasp what God is, but only what He is not and how other things are related to Him".' Insole points out, however, that Aquinas considered the substantial properties of 'goodness' and 'power' could only be applied analogically to God because we ascribe the substantial property of 'simplicity' to God (Insole 2000, 29). So: 'Aquinas realises, in a way that Hick does not, that 'formal properties' can only be applied justifiably to subjects *when we have substantial* reasons *to apply those formal properties*.'[Emphasis in original]

Hick admits that Insole is correct in stating that 'being authentically responded to in different religions' is not the same purely formal kind of category as 'being able to be referred to'. It would appear too that Hick realises that this presents a difficulty for his hypothesis by replying that the answer, 'does not lie in the nature of the Real itself but in our own human nature' (Hick 2000, 44). Hick rather sidesteps the former claim -being authentically responded to in different religions- by speculating as to whether we might attribute to the Real only those qualities on which the major religions agree-one of them being that it is benign. But we can only claim that the Real as benign *from our point of view*. So is Hick arguing that the former claim -being authentically responded to in different religions-is a statement made *from our point of view* (44) in the same way as substantial attributes as 'good' and 'benign'? He doesn't actually say so but the logic of his response to Insole suggests that he might. Nevertheless whether Hick's response represents a fatal blow to Insole's objection or a clever sleight of hand remains open to question.

5.5.2 Religious beliefs as cognitive

A key question remains however; how does Hick's distinction between substantial and formal attributes sit with his insistence that religions make cognitive claims about the Real, which are in principle eschatologically verifiable? According to D'Costa (1991, 8) what he calls Hick's 'Kantian revolution' 'poses major philosophical, theological and epistemological difficulties'. Such difficulties arise because of what D'Costa calls Hick's 'transcendental agnosticism'. According to D'Costa, in trying to avoid conceptualising the Real in either personal or non-personal terms, Hick falls prey to a number of difficult questions and is forced to replace even the Real at the centre of the universe of faith by human transformation. If we cannot know anything substantial about the Real *an sich* how can Hick know that there is a correspondence between the Real and any particular personae or impersonae? D'Costa is suggesting that Hick's position is no different to the atheist, sceptic or non-realist. Furthermore given that we cannot say anything substantial about the Real, how can the soteriological process of transformation from self-centrednesss to reality centredness be sustained without reference to the nature of the Real which informs and gives such a process meaning?

What should be the response to these questions? As noted several times Hick adopts a critical realist perspective to argue for the reality of the transcendent; for example (Hick 1991, 26): 'The Real is that which there must be if this range of experience is not *in toto* delusory. We thus postulate the noumenal Real as our way of affirming that the religious experience of humanity is our response-always historically and culturally conditioned-to a transcendent reality.' So adopting this critical realist position Hick goes on to explain how religious language used by believers is cognitive in nature. It is important not to conflate realist with literal, for religious language comes in many forms including analogy and myth. Indeed in a later work (Hick 2007) Hick discusses in some detail the work of Pseudo-Dionysius who affirms the absolute ineffability of the divine but yet is self-revealed in the Bible. This seemingly

obvious contradiction is met by insisting (Hick 2006, 168) that the language of revelation in the scriptures is symbolic and, '[T]he point of this symbolic language is to affect the hearers in such a way that they are helped to turn their lives towards the transcendent'. This is entirely consistent with Hick's argument in *An Interpretation of Religion* where he discussed mythological language in detail (Hick 1989, 343-361) and describes its function as expressing, 'the practical meaning of its referent by evoking in us an appropriate dispositional response' (351). This point has recently been made repeatedly by Armstrong (2009).

But Hick is in no doubt that, whatever the form, religious language is capable, in varying degrees, of being true or false (Hick 1989, 176). However truth here is a practical or pragmatic truth (Hick 1989, 351): 'True religious myths are accordingly those that evoke in us attitudes and modes of behaviour which are appropriate to our situation *vis-à-vis* the Real.' This truth or falsity is not open to verification in this life because religious language is essentially about infinite claims rather than the finite propositions of the material world. So Hick does not claim to *know* that there is a correspondence between the Real and humanly conceived personae and impersonae, moreover he would say we cannot know; at least in this life.

But this does not satisfy D'Costa who claims that because of Hick's need to postulate a conception of the Real as neither theistic nor non-theistic Hick's theory has a self-contradictory tension. Although a strong defender of the cognitive status of religious language, Hick is forced to enlarge his defence of realism by including non-theistic language, 'whilst at the same time denying that theistic and non-theistic claims are claims about reality' (D'Costa 1991, 6). D'Costa appears to take exception to Hick's view that the concrete pictures of the Real and of the the eschaton provided in the religious traditions are mythological, accusing him of both truncating the individual religions claims about the nature of reality and leaving us, with what D'Costa claims, as a rather vacuous notion of 'a limitlessly good fulfilment of the project of human existence' (7).

But D'Costa's claim that Hick denies that all religious claims are about reality doesn't stand up. Hick goes to great lengths to argue for the viability of eschatological verification. The passage that D'Costa quotes to make his point is where Hick (1989, 246) writes: 'It follows from this distinction between the Real as it is in itself and as it is thought and experienced through our religious concepts that we cannot apply to the Real *an sich* the characteristics encountered in its personae and impersonae.' However, as Kellenberger (1991, 20) points out it is important to ask what Hick means in this passage. Is he saying that we (before the eschaton) cannot apply such characteristics to the Real *an sich* or does he mean that logically such characteristics do not apply? Kellenberger claims that D'Costa understands Hick as making the logical point whereas it is more likely that he is making the former point, especially as Hick says in *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (Hick 1985, 100) that although he thinks it unlikely, it is logically possible that a particular set of religious dogmas may prove to correspond precisely with reality. And in *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989, 246-247) Hick makes his argument that if experienced attributes of Reality such as love in Christianity or consciousness and bliss in Adviata Vedanta are authentic phenomenal manifestations of the Real they have their source in the Real. Such qualities (love, bliss etc) may be different aspects of the Real or they may be 'super analogies' of the love and bliss we experience. In each of these examples it is clear that Hick *is* saying that religious claims are cognitive claims about reality. Kellenbeerger also notes that, if Hick can be criticised for transcendental agnosticism it is only as it relates to understanding the Real *an sich* before the eschaton. In Kellenberger's words (1991, 21): 'His [Hick's] view, we may say, has no transcendent problem of transcendental agnosticism.'

5.5.3 Myth metaphor and Truth Claims

However, what of Hick's claim that myths express pragmatic truths as opposed to literal truths? It is important to be clear about what Hick is saying. According to Hick's hypothesis we can make true or false literal and analogical statements about the phenomenal Real-our own conceptions of the Ultimate, the truth of which are governed by the internal norms of our tradition (Hick 1989, 172-189 and 2004, *xxxiii*). So statements such as God is love or Allah is *rahman, rahim* are literally true of the personae of Christianity and Islam and mythologically true of the Real.

I noted above Hick's pragmatic as opposed to theoretical view of truth and because of this Gillis (1989 and 1991) insists that Hick's account of myth is one in which myth is construed as non-cognitive. So, according to Gillis, Hick is arguing that language about the Real *an sich* is non-cognitive, which would seem to undermine his claim that religious language is indeed cognitive.

According to Gillis (1991, 38) myths do disclose something that is either true or false and are not 'merely linguistic tools for the proper orientation of attitudes or dispositions'. They do, in other words make truth claims. This is because, according to Gillis, myth and metaphor are *irreducible*. In other words there are truths which can be expressed by means of metaphorical language and no other. Gillis (1989, 152) provides a helpful example. A student is in a relationship with an overly protective girlfriend and is told by his best friend, 'Sally is your mother'. Gillis goes on to explain that this statement has the power of truth which would be lost if translated literally-as it would be absurd-or turned into a simile, which would not have the same impact and would change its meaning. Therefore, according to Gillis metaphors can be true or false, and are cognitive in intention. Indeed all language, including literal language is a linguistic construct and hence interpretive. Hence (Gillis 1989, 167): 'Hick considers mythological (as distinguished from literal) truth to be practical (rather than theoretical) truth, orientating persons in their lives to that which is being spoken about in myth. I contend that both types of

disclosure are involved in myths.' So Gillis would interpret the Genesis story of the 'Fall' as both theoretically true (or false) about the nature of humanity's relationship with God, and as true (or false) with regard to its power of orientating human beings towards a more spiritually fulfilling life. The problem that Gillis (1989,163) has with Hick's interpretation of religious language is that it is based upon a narrowly empirical interpretation.

So what does this mean for the viability of Hick's project? Obviously if Hick can (1989, 343-376) maintain his argument that religious language is literal or analogous about the phenomenal Real and mythological, in a pragmatic sense, about the Real *an sich* then he can maintain his argument that most claims to religious truth are not incompatible. They are, apart from a few 'historical' claims to truth, trans-historical and unanswerable either because, as yet, we don't have enough information or evidence to answer them, or because they can never be answered from our human perspective because they are mysteries. We therefore have to live with these differences and perhaps learn from them. In a later work (2006, 37) Hick admits that one cannot belong to more than one religious tradition but one can live within two or more spheres of spiritual influence.

But if Gillis is correct and all religious language discloses both theoretical and practical truth (or falsehood) can Hick maintain his position? Interestingly Hick does respond to criticisms of his approach to religious language (For example 2004, xxxiii-xxxvi) but does not respond directly to Gillis' careful argument. If he did respond he may well make the argument that even if Gillis is correct this does not necessarily weaken Hick's position as even if myth and metaphor are disclosive of theoretical truth; such truths relate to the personae and impersonae that human cultures have constructed as a result of their interface with reality and experience. So it wouldn't appear to matter if the language of each tradition is in fact cognitive in the theoretical sense as none of us can be sure of its truth or falsehood with regard to the Real *an sich*. Hence such claims to truth are transhistorical and therefore, it could be argued, should be seen as complementary rather than contradictory. Of course at the eschaton one set of claims may be found to be ultimately true

but we cannot know that now. What is important now, for Hick, is to argue that we can say that claims about the phenomenal Real are literally or analogically true and if so can provide a practical orientation that can be true of the Real *an sich* if they are in soteriological alignment. And we can know that by applying the ethical criterion based on the notion of the 'Fruits of the Spirit'; of love and compassion.

5.5.4 The self-understanding of religious traditions

Notwithstanding that, however, isn't such an argument in defence of Hick unacceptably revisionist? How can religious language understood in a Hickian way move or motivate people; indeed how can they have the practical force of myth as understood by Hick? Kellenberger (1991, 21) states that, 'religious language must be cognitive for the self-understanding of religious persons'. Job's cry of faith, 'I know my Redeemer liveth', would have to be qualified for a Christian as 'I know my Redeemer liveth, although I may be mistaken', which is hardly realistic for the majority of religious believers. So can mythological 'truths' have any power to move us? Does a Christian, for example, have to understand the traditional doctrines of Christianity such as the virgin birth, the incarnation and the resurrection as literally true to be influenced to move from self-centredness to God- centredness? Hick accepts that for some conservative Christians this is indeed the case but he also claims that for many Christians, even amongst the mainstream churches, a literal understanding of the miraculous conception of Jesus, or his having two complete natures of human and divine, or his bodily resurrection, are not necessary for acceptance of the power of Jesus' teachings about how to live, 'calling us to love our neighbour and even our enemies, to reject the 'eye for an eye' ethic, to be generous and forgiving…and to work for justice and peace in the world' (Hick 2004, xxxv). Whilst this is obviously true and whilst it would seem that Hick has illustrated here that a non-literal understanding of religious doctrine is not necessarily a hindrance to a vibrant spiritual life, such arguments will not convince the more conservative critics. But as Cheetham (2003, 176) has pointed out Hick 'does not speak for those whose positions

are already fixed, rather he will appeal to those who prefer to continue travelling'.

Nevertheless the question can still be asked: Is Hick's theory reductionist and if so how acceptable is it? How far can Hick maintain a seemingly neutral second order position? One who thinks that Hick's hypothesis is not only reductionist but essentially non-religious is Sinkinson. In *The Universe of Faiths: a critical study of John Hick's religious pluralism* (2001) Sinkinson provides an excellent and detailed critique of Hick's religious pluralism from an epistemological point of view. As noted in the previous chapter, Sinkinson is one of Hick's critics who does not see developments in Hick's writing as involving a number of paradigm shifts. Rather there is an epistemological unity to his work from *Faith and Knowledge* right up to *An Interpretation of Religion*.

Sinkinson notes that Hick admits to borrowing Kant's *noumenal/phenomenal* distinction but claims that Hick's debt to Kant is much greater than he admits despite claiming that he has not read Kant for many years. Sinkinson contends Kant and Hick can be seen as bookends of the Enlightenment project. Sinkinson gives a comprehensive array of examples as to why he thinks Hick's debt to Kant is greater than Hick admits or even realises (Sinkinson 2001, 68-84). In short he makes the point that Hick's religious pluralism is located firmly in the traditions of the Enlightenment and so argues that the Enlightenment establishes an alternative tradition which is in conflict with traditional religious belief. As such, Sinkinson claims Hick's philosophy of religion has never been Christian in outlook.

Theologically Sinkinson exposes what he thinks is Hick's debt to Schleiermacher: Sinkinson like other conservative Christian critics understand Schleiermacher as the liberal root of Christian theology as Kant is the liberal root of morality/ethics. Drawing on the work of Lindbeck, Sinkinson characterises Schleiermacher as the perfect example of *experiential-expressivist* approach to religion and states that Hick is a 'straightforward example of an expressivist' (116), albeit a 'qualified expressivist' (116) but is

non the less a practical expressivist: 'Though there is a formal commitment to a divine reality 'out there' the true concern of religion is with a feeling in our own hearts.' Expressivists seek to identify a common experience underlying different traditions. Despite the conflicting nature of doctrine and practice expressivists claim they can detect a comment thread. According to Lindbeck (1984, 32): 'Because this core experience is said to be common to a wide diversity of religions, it is difficult or impossible to specify its distinctive features, and yet unless this is done, the assertion of commonality becomes logically and empirically vacuous.'

> It is impossible to state what this common experience actually is, because one has to use the concepts and vocabulary of a particular tradition. The tradition of liberalism supplies suitably vague categories in order to attempt to be neutral in its description of religious experience. Using these vague categories makes it difficult, perhaps impossible, to find evidence that could count against the liberal claim. There are no conflicting truth claims or creedal statements that can contradict the pluralist claim of a common religious experience. This is because the claim does not arise as a conclusion of investigation, but is an assumption built into the investigation from the start (Sinkinson 2001, 118-119).

Furthermore: 'While Hick attempts to describe religions with a view not dependent on any tradition, he fails: his position is as much a part of a tradition of enquiry as any other.' 'Furthermore this tradition of enquiry can only provide an impoverished and reductionist account of the world religions.' According to D'Costa (1996, 226) Hick's pluralism is just another position, which, 'operates within the same logical structure as exclusivism'.

Are these criticisms fair? Firstly I will consider the identification of Hick as an *experiential-expressivist*. Whilst there may be elements of this in Hick's account of religion, the emphasis on religious experience rather than a revelatory propositional account of faith, there are as I have indicated above (see Twiss 1990) other Lindbeckian categories in Hick's work. Lindbeck,

himself, favours the *cultural-linguistic* framework, whereby, 'objective collections of customs, rituals and language shape the way that religious persons live, think and feel' (Sinkinson 2001, 122). Doctrine, according to Lindbeck (1984, 33) is a 'common phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being a manifestation of those subjectivities'. This is perfectly in line with Hick's account as Hick does not follow Schleiermacher in his insistence that, '[T]he concept of God is conditioned only by the feeling of absolute dependence and not by any independent knowledge or speculation. It is untouched by the activity of the mind in its construction of representations' (Proudfoot 1985, 21). Hick does not claim that there is a common religious experience independent of particular concepts or beliefs. In this way his epistemology is thoroughly Kantian in that all thought and experience is shaped by forms and categories of the mind. Hick (1983, 86) writes:

> Such a theory….. has the merit that it does not lead us to play down the differences between the various forms of religious experience and thought. It does not generate any pressure to think that God the Father and Brahman, or Allah and the Dharmakaya, are phenomenologically, i.e. as experienced and described, identical; or that the human responses which they evoke, in spiritual practices, cultural forms, life styles, types of society, etc., are the same.

Secondly the claim that Hick's theory is an impoverished and reductionist account of religion is made by several other critics (for example Netland 1991). Is Hick actually guilty of this? As Cheetham (2000, 144) has stated it is important to understand what Hick is actually saying about the integrity of individual religions. Because it is an inductive account arising from his own experience of religious plurality rather than a conscious application of enlightenment rationality to religions as they are actually understood by believers, Hick's pluralist hypothesis is intended as a second order philosophical account rather than a first order discourse. 'Hick's pluralist hypothesis leaves religions as they are; that is, his pluralism is an explanatory hypothesis rather than a reductionist exercise.'

Whilst Cheetham is correct in emphasising the second order nature of Hick's intentions here it is, nevertheless, difficult to argue that there is no element of reductionism. The issue is, rather, whether or not such reductionism is legitimate. According to Proudfoot (1985, 190): 'Reductionism has become a derogatory epithet in the history and philosophy of religion.' The objection appears to be that religious experience cannot legitimately be explained in historical, psychological or sociological terms. So explanations of religion by such as Freud (psychological) or Marx (sociological) are illegitimate because a 'distinctive subject matter …requires a distinctive method'. This is because such methods fail to grasp the *meaning* of religious phenomena.

Proudfoot (1985, 196) is illuminating here when he distinguishes between *descriptive reductionism* and *explanatory reductionism*. According to this distinction descriptive reductionism is the failure to identify a religious experience by which the subject identifies it. So: 'To describe the experience of a mystic by reference only to alpha waves, altered hear rate and changes in bodily temperature is to misdescribe it,' or: 'To characterise the experience of a Hindu mystic in terms drawn from the Christian tradition is to misidentify it.' Consequently such descriptive reductionism fails to provide an accurate account of the subject's experience. *Explanatory reductionism* on the other hand offers an, 'explanation of an experience that are not those of the subject and that might not meet with his [sic] approval' (197). Proudfoot claims that this is perfectly justifiable and is normal procedure. He gives an example from history whereby historians offer explanations of past events by employing concepts such as socialisation, ideology, means of production and feudal economy yet, '[S]eldom can these concepts be properly be ascribed to the people whose behaviour is the object of the historian's study' (197). But this is not a problem for the explanation stands or falls as to how well it accounts for the available evidence. Indeed the study of history could not proceed without such explanatory frameworks.

So the problem we are encountering with critiques of Hick's account of religion is the failure to distinguish between these two kinds of reductionism. Such a failure results in;

the claim that any account of religious emotions, practices, or experience must be restricted to the perspective of the subject and must employ only the terms, beliefs and judgments that would meet with his [sic] approval. This claim derives its plausibility from examples of descriptive reductionism but is then extended to preclude explanatory reduction. When so extended, it becomes a protective strategy (Proudfoot, 1985, 197).

Consequently the subject's perspective becomes normative. This being the case it is difficult to see how there can be a satisfactory account of the world's religions. It is difficult to see how the study of religion can proceed. As Hick (2001, 171) points out in response to D'Costa's accusation of exclusivism, religious exclusivism and religious pluralism are of different logical kinds, 'the one being a self-committing affirmation of faith and the other a philosophical hypothesis'.

> The hypothesis is offered as the best available explanation, from a religious as distinguished from a naturalistic point of view, of the data of the history of religions. Pluralism is thus not another historical religion making an exclusive religious claim, but a meta-theory about the relation between the historical religions. Its logical status as a second-order philosophical theory or hypothesis is different in kind from that of a first-order religious creed or gospel. Also the religious pluralist does not, like the religious exclusivist, consign non-believers to perdition, but invites them to try to produce a better explanation of the data (171).

Elsewhere Hick (1989, xiii) refers to his project as a 'philosophical ground plan'.

It needs to be emphasised, however, that this view does not contradict the legitimate claim that in religious education we must learn to see the world, as far as possible, through the eyes of the Buddhist, Sikh, Muslim etc. Rather the point being made is that critics such as Sinkinson and Netland construe Hick's

account as offering an alternative *description* of religion to that provided by the self understanding of a particular tradition. According to Sinkinson, this is a modernist or Enlightenment version of religion that attempts to *describe* religions 'with a view not dependent on any tradition' (Sinkinson, 2001, 119).

But Hick explicitly denies that he is attempting to describe a new religion. In *The Rainbow of Faiths*, for example he (1995, 123) denies the suggestion that it is his view that one day there will be a single global religion. On the contrary: 'Just as the continuing variety of human cultures is of great value, so also is the continuing variety of forms of religion.' With regard to the claim that he is imposing a post- Enlightenment description of religion on the religions as they understand themselves, Hick makes two points. Firstly that historically, religions have always developed and changed and secondly that a pluralist view of religion did not arise out of the Enlightenment project; this is historically false. From Rumi in the thirteenth century to Guru Nanak in the fifteenth there have been those, particularly in the east, who have advocated a pluralist view. Indeed such a view has also existed in the west, for example Nicolas of Cusa, in the fifteenth century and William Penn in the seventeenth century (Hick 2004, xl: see also Hick 1995, 34-37). As Hick (2004, xli) writes: 'No doubt it was the European Enlightenment that freed the west to take this insight on board; but its origins lie much further back in human history.'

5.6 Hick's Religious Pluralism: first or second order hypothesis?

I have mentioned at the beginning of this chapter the challenge facing anyone attempting to come to terms with Hick's work that has spanned over fifty years and a wide variety of subject matter. A key component of this challenge is that Hick has been, and still is, seen as either a theologian or a philosopher of religion or indeed both. A great many critics have come from a conservative Christian theological background whilst others are prominent philosophers. Theologians tend to treat Hick's religious pluralism as a theology. D'Costa (1987), for example, refers to Hick's theory as a *theology* of religions, whereas Hick prefers to refer to a *philosophy* of religious pluralism. Is this merely a matter of semantics or is there something more significant at stake in relation to these terms?

I shall argue in this concluding section that there is a significant difference, with significant consequences both for, what we might call, religious life and religious education.

It was noted in the discussion in the section above that theological critiques such as Netland, Sinkinson and D'Costa, attack Hick's position as if it were a first order hypothesis. In Proudfoot's terms they are accusing Hick of descriptive reductionism. An answer to these criticisms is to contend that Hick's hypothesis is not guilty of this charge as Hick is propounding a second order explanatory hypothesis. In so doing Hick is leaving the religions as they are in as much as he believes that religious traditions express religious statements that are literally true of the phenomenal real but mythologically true of the Real as it is in itself. If one merely reads Hick's most recent writings on religious pluralism (1989: 1999: 2000 and 2006 for example) it would be possible to claim that Hick is being entirely consistent here. However, what does one make of Hick's theological writing such as *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977) or more recently *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (1993)? Isn't it the case, as Netland (1991) would claim that Hick is being reductionist in a descriptive sense here; that most Christian *do* understand Jesus to be

literally the Son of God and those who understand this language to be metaphorical understand metaphor as irreducible and truth claiming. And what is to be made of Hick's (1995, 105) comment that, 'we really do have to make a choice between a one-tradition absolutism and a genuinely pluralistic interpretation of the global religious situation'?

These two examples would seem to give credence to both Sinkinson's and D'Costa's claim that Hick's theory is far from being neutrally explanatory; rather it is an absoluting 'tradition' itself that is modernist/post Enlightenment. Whilst Hick has convincingly argued that religious pluralism predates the Enlightenment and whilst it is true that it has come to the fore in recent times, it is not a product of the Enlightenment, Cheetham (2003, 163) asks tantalisingly whether Hick would be better to allow his hypothesis to make a first order religious appeal. This echoes Badham's point referred to above about Hick's refusal to take sides when arguing for the rationality of a religious perspective in an ambiguous universe. The reason Cheetham suggests Hick might allow his hypothesis to become a first order explanation is that it is only as a first order theory that it would make *religious* sense. To make religious sense a theory must display passionate concern rather than abstract aloofness. So does it make more sense to argue for a pluralist *spirituality*? It might be said that this would be a more honest position in as much as there would be no doubt that a theologically conservative spirituality is in conflict with a pluralist spirituality.

But Hick would argue that such a turn would hinder the purpose of his hypothesis because it would merely become another dogma amongst the others. Furthermore, on the evidence of Hick's most recent writing, he does recognise the importance of his theory making religious sense. It is important to remember that Hick says for Christians, Muslims, Hindus etc., their religious beliefs about the phenomenal Real are literally true but mythologically true of the Real *an Sich*. Given this, it would be unusual or impossible for a person to be a member of more that one religious tradition. However, if one accepts that even though spirituality takes different forms within different traditions, these differences may be seen as complementary

rather than contradictory. So one can live, according to this view, 'within two or more overlapping spheres of spiritual influence' (Hick 2006, 37). A concrete example of this is given by Hick himself in the book just referred to (181-190) , where he maintains his Christian roots, in worshipping terms, by attending Quaker services, whilst at the same time gaining benefit from Buddhist *sattipathana*, 'mindfulness' meditation. Indeed he has admitted that he finds great wisdom in the Sutras (See Appendix 1).

However in making religious sense and in gaining benefit from overlapping spiritual traditions would one not have to hold a particularly religious view of this? If one finds wisdom in the sutras is it not because one thinks that what the Buddha taught in the four noble truths is true? This need not contradict a view that what Jesus teaches in his parables is also true and one may remain a Christian and hold these complementary beliefs. But what is the theological significance of this? Hick has made the distinction between implicit and explicit pluralists (See for example, Hick 2001, 190 and appendix 1). He would argue that many religious people today are implicit pluralists; certainly those living side by side with people of non Christian faith in our big cities. As implicit pluralists they would regard their Muslim or Hindu neighbour has having equal rights to them and would respect their faith but would not necessarily reflect on the possible theological consequences of this. They would not necessarily be explicit in their pluralism. Indeed some may not even want to reflect in explicit terms as such reflection would involve emotion-religious people care about what they believe and this might be dangerous if our passion for our own tradition conflicts with our *human* feelings about our neighbours.

Hick is usually classed as a liberal and hence his theory is widely criticised by post modernists and conservatives. Theologically liberalism is not popular at the moment. But Hick would maintain in his defence that he is not imposing anything on the religions. His hypothesis is inductive; his criteria for salvation/liberation are taken from the religions themselves. He has sought to propose a hypothesis that is a second order explanatory theory which reflects religious diversity and attempts to offer a serious explanation of the data. As

such it may not prove to be religiously satisfactory for everyone; according to Hick it is not intended to be. But if it is to be effective, if people are to care about it, if they are to change their views towards the religions themselves then it might be necessary, as Cheetham suggests, to reposition it as a first order hypothesis. As such it might prove to be inappropriate for the purposes of religious education.

A possible way forward might be provided by a 'post-liberal' argument that by defining the choice, as Hick does, as religion either being a response to a transcendent Real or complete illusion and self-deception, Hick has raised the theological stakes too high (Liechty 1990, 81). For once we begin to say anything about the Real *an sich* we are inevitably making such a concept, 'more interesting and worthy of theological attention than any or even all of our partial and halting constructions of God' (82). According to this view only humanly articulated constructions of 'God' (in other words Hick's phenomenal Real) can concern theology. But this is not to side with the non-realist camp because, '[T] religious experiences of human beings are so real and so resistant to reductionist criticism that we find the number of people claiming such experiences growing even in scientifically advanced societies…..That religious experiences are real and not an illusion is simply an evident fact' (85). If pressed further to analyse the implications of this view for Hick's theory it is clear that a post-liberal like Liechty would say that Hick would be well advised to give up trying to 'defend' the reality of the Real *an sich*, and return to his premise that religious experience of the world is rational and reflect on its meaning. This is because a pluralistic approach to 'other' religious traditions which ends only in creating another more 'truer-than-the-others' theology is not a desired outcome (82).

5.7   Conclusion

Such questions concerning the status of Hick's interpretation of religion provide ample material for philosophy of religion classes for older school students. However this thesis is concerned with articulating an argument for

religious education in schools as one that is distinctive in that it reflects the essential nature of its subject matter. Therefore, despite questions about the validity of Hick's pluralist conclusion that as far as we can tell the major religions are equally salvific, it is Hick's religious interpretation of religion, understood as a second order explanatory framework that interprets religions as providing an analysis of human nature and of providing spiritual paths of transcendence and that does not fall foul of accusations of descriptive reductionism, that can enable religious educators to present religions in a *religious* way (see for example Teece 1997, 2010). In so doing it can enable the subject to argue its case as a distinctive contribution to a young person's education.

In this chapter I have attempted to argue that many of the criticisms of Hick in the literature of theology and the philosophy of religion can be countered and that his interpretation of religion can stand up to scrutiny. But what of his critics in the field of religious education? This is the subject of the next two chapters.

6. John Hick and religious education: Hick's contribution to the Birmingham Agreed syllabus (1975)

6.1 Introduction

The question as to how far the work of John Hick has influenced religious education in schools is a more ambiguous one than that concerned with his influence in theology and philosophy of religion.

The third part of my third hypothesis states that Hick's interpretation of religion needs to be presented fairly and accurately in religious education literature and that hitherto this has not been the case. This argument needs to be addressed in three parts. In this chapter I shall illustrate that references to Hick in the RE literature are few and far between. Secondly I will consider what can be termed Hick's 'practical' influence and as such concentrates largely on his contribution the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus of 1975. Then in chapter 7 I will consider what I call his possible theoretical influence. In other words I ask whether or not if it is sustainable to argue that that his philosophy of religion has influenced theoretical thinking in the subject.

6.2 Hick and religious education

If a religious educator was to do as Badham (1993, 5) suggests theologians and philosophers of religion do, namely to pick up any textbook on the history of religious education over the past 50 years or so and count the number of references to Hick in the index, then a different story of influence (or lack of influence) can be told.

In reading the most recent survey of religious education in England and Wales from 1944 to the present (Copley 2008) it is possible to conclude that Hick has had virtually no influence on the subject. Hick's name does not appear in the index. He does, however, appear once, on page 108 in a reference to the

1975 Birmingham Agreed Syllabus for RE: the first multi-faith RE syllabus. This syllabus was seen as so important at the time that the summer 1976 edition of *Learning for Living* (now the *British Journal of Religious Education*) was devoted to a symposium on it. I shall return to Hick's involvement in the Birmingham Syllabus below. In the meantime I will continue with the argument that there is little evidence of Hick's influence on religious education to be found in the religious education literature. In the 1996 publication *Christian Theology and Religious Education*; a book in which one might expect substantial reference to so eminent a scholar, there are only two very brief references to Hick-one by Ninian Smart who likens Hick's pluralist approach to his and one note on page 75, where Hick is used to make a point about the difference, according to some, between theology and the philosophy of religion. In Michael Grimmitt's influential *Religious Education and Human Development* (1987) there is one reference to Hick-a note on page 394.

Why is this? How can it be that an eminent thinker covering such a wide range of religiously interesting topics (Cheetham 2003, 8) is absent from such works? Firstly, of course, Hick has never written about Religious Education; the closest being his chapter in honour of John Hull in Bates et al (2006). Secondly, and significantly, since Smart's original work on a phenomenological approach to RE (Smart 1968), few religious educators have looked to theology or the philosophy of religion to support a rationale for multi-faith religious education (See Copley 2008). Grimmitt, for example provides a humanistic rationale, which draws more on resources from social sciences than theology or the philosophy of religion. This is interesting as Grimmitt's work could be illustrated and supported by Hick's. Just to take one example from *Religious Education and Human Development* (1987, 260-261):

> It would, however, be possible and legitimate for theology to provide
> the rationale I have offered with a theological underpinning-although
> this would be neither necessary to the rationale nor sufficient for it. For
> example, Christian Theology might offer such an underpinning by
> providing an 'Incarnational Theology of Humanisation'.......Other
> 'theologies of humanisation' are implicit in non-Christian religions:

indeed, as I hope I have shown, all religions provide a view of the human and a vision of the goal to which human beings should aspire……..The development of such theological underpinnings, although unnecessary for religious education's educational legitimation, would, perhaps, enable religious adherents, including teachers, who are disconcerted by the humanistic character of the rationale I have put forward, to be confident that the basis it provides for studying their religion does not assail its integrity.

Grimmitt's point about it being unnecessary for theology to provide educational legitimation for religious education may be true but theology and the philosophy of religion can provide a clearer vision of what is *distinctive* about religious education in relation to other curriculum subjects.

To illustrate the point further that religious educators have not looked towards theology or the philosophy of religion as a resource to support a rationale for the subject Hull (1984, 285) argued that;

there is an important sense in which contemporary British RE in county (state) schools should be thought of as a new subject in the curriculum, having its roots in the philosophy and sociology of education and in the theories of curriculum development. It is not a natural development of the old RE, which was a domestic activity of the church, but represents a radical break with past traditions, which can be seen as secularization, the professionalization, or the liberation of the subject, depending upon one's point of view.

However, recently there has been a renewed interest in theological perspectives on modern religious education usually from a critical Conservative Christian perspective; for example Cooling (1994); Wright (1997; 1998; 1999 and 2004), and Barnes (2000 and 2001).[7]

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[7] In addition to these critics, Copley (2005;2008) has also expressed concern about the removal of a theological perspective from RE.

Each of these writers is critical of aspects of multi-faith religious education. Whilst their concerns are, essentially, different both Cooling and Wright see Hick's pluralist hypothesis as a foundation of what they see as an unacceptable imposition of a liberal ideology on the subject. So Hick becomes an apologist for an uncritical, tolerance aim for religious education that writers such as Wright see as paternalistic and damaging to pupils' critical development (Wright 1993).

Interestingly and problematically such criticism focuses on Hick's pluralist hypothesis but without reference to his earlier work. For example Cooling (1994, 35) states that: 'Hick's starting point is that absolutist approaches to religious pluralism that have traditionally dominated Christian thinking, and assume the superiority of Christianity, are no longer adequate.' It isn't just Conservative Christians who are guilty of this. Hobson and Edwards (1999, 52-61), who are largely sympathetic to Hick fail to appreciate fully the potential of his work because they concentrate only on his recent writings. This is unhelpful for two reasons. Firstly Hick's pluralist hypothesis is not the starting point at all but the consequence of his earlier epistemology that argues that it is rational to base religious beliefs on experience. Secondly this assumption, that one can take an aspect of Hick's work like his pluralist hypothesis and critique it in isolation from the rest of his work is a mistake. In the next chapter I illustrate how such a mistake has significant consequences for the legitimacy and accuracy of the criticisms made of Hick's work by some religious educators, and fails to recognise the potential of his work for religious education.

Therefore it is not at all clear that a case can be made for Hick having influenced the subject.

6.3 Hick's practical influence: The 1975 Birmingham Agreed Syllabus

Notwithstanding what has already been said, it is necessary to examine this question of Hick's influence or lack of influence on modern religious education

a little more deeply. Such a consideration must begin with reference to the Birmingham syllabus for this is the one concrete example of Hick actually being involved in religious education as chair of the Co-ordinating Working Party to the syllabus conference. In examining the documentation related to the development and contemporaneous discussion of the syllabus it is possible to both underestimate and overstate Hick's influence. This is because it is important to make a distinction between, what I shall call a *practical and explicit influence*, and an *implicit and theoretical influence*. On the practical level Hick was influential in pushing through this significant development in religious education and so it could be said that he has had a *practical* influence on the subject.

In several of his books (for example Hick, 1980; 2003) Hick writes about his experience of taking up the chair of theology in Birmingham in 1967. He didn't know Birmingham before and was immediately fascinated and challenged by the religious and cultural diversity of the city. He was also concerned with the prevailing prejudice and racism in Britain, which manifested itself in widespread discrimination in employment, housing, education, medicine and other welfare services. Being an active citizen Hick became a founder and first chair of All Faiths for One Race (AFFOR). In *God Has Many Names* (1980) Hick details some of the work of AFFOR at the time and some of the resistance to it from a nervous and conservative Christian Church. At the same time as being chair of AFFOR Hick was also chair of the Religious and Cultural Panel of the Birmingham Community Relations Committee and it was this panel, set up by the Government, that called for a new syllabus for RE. Hick was asked to serve on the Agreed Syllabus Conference and to co chair the committee that oversaw the conference's work.

It is obvious from reading Hick's account of this time that the driving force behind a new syllabus was one of social justice rather than one based on theological perspectives on the relationship between the different religious traditions. It was a case, as Hick points out, of Christians behaving in a way that accepts non- Christian religions as valid areas of divine revelation and salvation in a *practical* sense. For example, in terms of meeting others with

respect, enabling non-Christian traditions to find places in which to worship, in some cases redundant churches, accepting the need for an RE syllabus that reflects the religious and cultural mix in schools etc. But many or most were still thinking in old theological categories. In other words the practice was outstripping the theology:

> The theological problem (i.e. the Christian response to non-Christian traditions) has in principle been solved in the minds of a growing number of Christians. It has been solved, not in theory but in practice, by allowing human needs to take precedence over the implications of the accepted theological language (Hick 1980, 41).

And so it was, according to Hick (1993, 141), new experiences rather than new thoughts that drew him as a philosopher of religion into issues of religious pluralism and as a Christian into inter faith dialogue. It was these experiences and Hick's desire to be involved practically in religious and race relations in the city at that time that were the reasons for his involvement in RE, rather than any intention to contribute to the theoretical foundations of the subject.[8] As evidence for this claim we need to consult Hick's autobiography (Hick 2003) and the special edition of *Learning for Living* (Summer 1976). The latter included a special feature on the syllabus and a debate between Harry Stopes-Roe, a Humanist, and John Hick regarding the legality of the 1974 syllabus and the place of 'non-religious stances for living' (a phrase coined by Stopes-Roe) within it.

Firstly whilst fully supporting an 'educational' approach to RE, Hick was happy to leave the details to the 'professionals'. He recognised that the 'growing mood in educational circles for a new start in RE' (162) was led by Ninian Smart and the SHAP conferences. And that the major figure in the revision of the syllabus from a 'confessionally' based Christian model to a multi-faith model was John Hull, who, 'needless to say, knew far more than me about religious education and its problems' (Hick 2003, 166).

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[8] At this time Hick had barely begun to address the philosophical and theological questions posed by religious pluralism although he did recognise the importance of such questions See Hick 1973 16-17).

Secondly and more substantially there is the debate over the legality of the syllabus. The legality of the1974 Birmingham syllabus was challenged on two grounds. The first ground was the trivial matter of whether or not what was presented constituted a syllabus. The second objection, however, related to the inclusion of 'non-religious stances for living', which included Humanism. The key issue was that, according to the minutes of the Education Committee of 11th June 1974, 'non-religious matters could be included in a syllabus so long as they advanced the instruction of religion and related to religious instruction and were not taught for their own sake' (Stopes-Roe 1976, 134). To this Stopes-Roe objected arguing that the original 1974 version of the syllabus was a 'valid education in ultimate questions, and stimulus for the pupils' responsible search for meaning. Religions and non-religions are treated together; at no point is a particular answer to ultimate questions presupposed'. However, according to Stopes-Roe, the 1975 version is 'dominated by religion'. [9] It seems that Stopes-Roe's point is one about the relationship between aims, content and outcomes in religious education.

It is possible to express Stopes-Roe's point in Hickian terms. Essentially what he is arguing for is a religious education that recognises an ambiguous universe which can be interpreted in either a naturalistic or religious way and that it is not educational to include Humanism, merely as a support to the study of religion (Hick 2003, 164) rather than for its own sake as a valid interpretation of the world.

If Hick understood this point he didn't admit to it. In his reply to Stopes-Roe he answered solely in terms of *content*. He wrote;

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[9] The two versions were

1974: The purpose of 'religious education' is not only to enlarge and deepen the understanding of the different *stances for living* (italics added by Stopes-Roe) to which different people are committed but also in some cases to stimulate within the pupils a personal search for meaning and in others to illuminate a sense of meaning which they already have. These two aims must both be present if true religious education is to take place.
1975: The syllabus should thus be used to enlarge and deepen the pupils' understanding of *religion* by studying world *religions*, and by exploring all those elements in human experience which raise questions about life's ultimate meaning and value. This involves informing pupils in a descriptive, critical and experiential manner about what *religion* is, and increasing their sensitivity to the areas of experience from which a *religious* view of life may arise. It should stimulate within the pupils, and assist them in the search for, a personal sense of meaning in life, whilst enabling them to understand the beliefs and commitments of others (emphasis added by Stopes-Roe).

the study unit on Humanism remains virtually unchanged between the two versions. It is true that the 1975 version makes explicit and contextual relevance to religious education of the study of non-religious stances for living: namely, that such study helps illuminate man's total religious situation today. But for all *practical purposes* (my emphasis) - that is to say, in terms of what happens in the classroom-Humanism has the same place, and is treated in detail in the same way, in the 1974 and 1975 versions (Hick 1976b, 136).

Hick doesn't appear to appreciate the essential issue of pedagogy that Stopes-Roe is making. But this wasn't Hick's main concern. His main concern was the inclusion of non-Christian faiths in the RE syllabus. It was a desire driven by social justice rather than pedagogical principles. He wrote:

Whilst I strongly supported the inclusion of some teaching about communism and humanism I was even more concerned to get the basic multi faith character of the Syllabus accepted, and the attacks on the other issue served as a lightening conductor to divert Conservative attention from this (Hick 2003, 166).

Undoubtedly Hick was a (if not the) major driving force behind getting this syllabus adopted and this is significant. Cole (1976) writing about the importance of the syllabus made two telling points. Firstly, that the 1975 syllabus was the first syllabus of *religious education* produced by a British LEA because education is given precedence over theology (a principle set out in the West Riding Syllabus) but further it ' has also set its face against the purpose of nurturing children in the Christian faith, and towards enlarging and deepening the pupil's understanding of religion by studying world religions, and by exploring all those elements in human experience which raise questions about life's ultimate meaning and value' (Cole 1976, 127). The second significant point (Cole 1976, 128) was that the syllabus was more important for its principles than its content: 'Birmingham has produced documents which are shot through with religious pluralism from beginning to

end.' However, how far any principle of pluralism (in a philosophically developed sense rather than merely arguing for the inclusion of non-Christian faiths) affected the syllabus is open to doubt.

Cox (1976) writing in the same journal under the heading 'Does it do as it says?' began with the question; what is the purpose of religious education? According to Cox the syllabus states that this purpose is twofold;

A   To help boys and girls 'to learn to live and work together in a pluralist situation' (p7 of the syllabus);

B   To enable them 'to develop the skills involved in coming to a mature understanding of religion (p6 of the syllabus).

However, Cox could be accused of being selective here, as the syllabus does not state an aim as such. All claims to know what are the aims of the syllabus are essentially speculative. Indeed Cox is forced to admit this (albeit implicitly) when he
concludes that 'one has to ask what is its *operative* rationale'? (126). He asks several questions of the syllabus:

1. Does it look on religious education as the acquiring of blocks of knowledge about life stances, only some of which can be considered because there are so many of them?

2. Or does it regard the subject as enabling pupils to shop around among those religious and life stances that appeal to them in order to 'find a faith to live by?

3. Or does it indeed envisage religious education as giving skills to understand basic human beliefs and motivations and conveying the ability to be consciously and informedly discriminating in a pluralistic age?

4. Or are all these three views operative in different parts? [10]

Similar points made by two different writers of the time reinforces this concern about RE. Firstly Derek Webster (1976, 89) in discussing aims of RE notes, 'generalisations are attempted which are far in advance of evidence; it has been impossible to operationalise aims. Thus it is that religious education has attempted too much and achieved too little.' Secondly H.E Lupton (1975, 134) comments: 'Continuing controversy, such as the legal wrangle over Birmingham's new syllabus, gives emphasis to the fact that one *still* (emphasis added) cannot find an unequivocal answer to the question, what are the purposes and contents proper to religious education in county schools?' He says (Lupton 1975, 136): 'There is so much in the syllabus that is new and good and courageous and forward-looking that we can only regret that it does not always seem to keep clearly in view its own stated objectives.'

However, despite these criticisms Hardy (1975, 11-15) argued that an overall rational was clearly evident in the syllabus.

Hardy claims to have uncovered the underlying view of religion and the purposes of the subject as stated in the syllabus. This is that, '[R]eligion is taken in the Birmingham syllabus as a 'world view', an understanding of the universe' and religion 'is concerned with a certain way of viewing the world together with a certain kind of commitment'. He develops this by characterising the ideal religious education pupil according to this interpretation of the syllabus. This is as a person who experiences the world in Hickian terms, in other words as an interpreter of experience; we all experience the same world but experience it differently and it is a world that may be experienced religiously or naturalistically. However Hardy believes that the syllabus tends towards encouraging the pupil to interpret the world religiously: 'It develops in the child a kind of consciousness, a useable interpretation of the world which will organise his experience and which will enable him to live morally as a human being.' In effect 'this syllabus

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[10] Interestingly such questions can still be asked of more recent syllabuses and 'official' RE documents;

indoctrinates people in that position' and' the main concentration is on enabling the student to function in a religious way, experiencing and interpreting the world in such a way that it has meaning and there are moral consequences'.

Furthermore because the emphasis is seen to lie on the presentation of different 'world views' or 'life stances' pupils are left without any criteria for 'responsible' choosing. This is because 'the intent of the syllabus is to acquaint the student with a wide range of particular religious interpretations and practices without particularly commending any'. The pupil is thus being implicitly encouraged to 'become his own Bahai religion'. Thus 'the consequence of this approach to religious education is to make it into a training in religion, where religion is seen as an interpretational ability combined with a moral capacity on the part of the child'. So religions become merely functional in the process.

It is interesting to note that Hardy sets these criticisms of the syllabus within, what he believes, is the context of 'the history of theology and religion in the western world during the last two hundred years' the main characteristic of which has been the 'tendency to subjectivise religion'. Such a critique of religion and its influence on modern theories of RE has been more substantially made by Wright (1997: 1998: 1999) and which I will discuss in the next chapter.

How far any of this theological influence can be explicitly levelled at Hick in terms of an underlying rationale for the syllabus is open to doubt. There is little evidence to support the view that Hardy's interpretation and critique of the syllabus was, in effect, an unpacking of a Hickian influence in theological terms. A cynic might ask the question as to how far Hardy's suspicions can be levelled at what he actually finds in the syllabus and how much of his critique was derived from what he knew, as Lecturer on Theology at Birmingham, of Hick's views.

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an issue that I address in chapter eight.

6.4   Conclusion

Hick was extremely active in arguing and working for a new Agreed Syllabus for Birmingham. He was driven by his concern for justice for the non-Christian faiths in the city. An educational approach, in Hick's view, was closely aligned to this in terms of the appropriateness of pupils learning about the plural world around them, the need for non-Christian children to learn about their own faith, and for all children to learn about the 'religion integral to the history of Britain', which is Christianity (Hick 2003, 163). This was to be contrasted with the idea of RE as being an extension of the work of the churches and other religious organisations into schools. The fact that it was possible to construct a syllabus that could be attacked as 'confessional' in a generally religious way did not appear to register with Hick at the time.

7.   John Hick and religious education: theoretical perspectives

7.1   Introduction

Following on from the discussion of Hick's involvement in the 1975 Birmingham Agreed Syllabus for religious education, I will now discuss a wider dimension to the claim that Hick's work has influenced religious education. There are examples in the religious education literature where writers have been critical of an assumed influence of Hick on multi faith religious education *per se*. It is therefore important to clarify why such critics have a negative approach to Hick's work and to assess whether or not this is warranted. The reason for such negativity is that critics have concentrated on his pluralist hypothesis as the starting point for a critical discussion of his interpretation of religion. It has already been argued that in order to form a fair and balanced critique of Hick then his work should be considered as a whole. It is not evident that this has been the case in the religious education literature, so in expressing a disagreement with a pluralist approach to religion critics of Hick have misinterpreted him as a liberal relativist in the romantic theological tradition of Schleiermacher, and as recommending a universalising religious faith based on a common religious experience. Hick explicitly denies this (see appendix 1, 212). These accusations are in fact false and cannot be substantiated. They distort the integrity of Hick's work as a whole and negate his potential contribution to RE.

7.2   Hick's theoretical influence: an apologist for 'tolerant RE'?

I have argued in the previous chapter that Hick's motivation behind the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus was that of social justice rather than any explicit link between his academic writings and the theory of religious education.

What I argue in this chapter is that because of this others worked out the link for him and Hick came to be seen as an apologist for a type of religious education expressed in one of the aims in the SCAA Model Syllabuses (1994). This is the aim concerning tolerance namely: 'Religious education should enable pupils to develop a positive attitude towards other people, respecting their right to hold different beliefs from their own, and towards living in a society of diverse religions.' It is a view promoted in the 1980s by the Swann Report and has certainly figured prominently in Agreed Syllabuses since the 1980s.

A further dimension to the linking of Hick to a tolerance aim of RE is the relating of Hick's work to particular pedagogical approaches. This is evidenced in the reference to Hick in the Hansard debate on religious education in 1992. The debate in the House of Lords on Wednesday 17 June 1992 was introduced by Caroline Cox and was concerned with how far the provisions of the 1988 Act relating to RE were being fulfilled. Of course a judgement about this depended on what interpretation was being made of these provisions. It can be said, in this case, that the interpretation was that religious education should consist of a systematic study of religions, with Christianity predominating in the syllabus based on an exclusivist view of religious truth. This is a reference to the traditional typology of categories in relation to Christian positions with regard to non-Christian faiths in terms of both truth claims and salvation claims. The exclusivist view is that religions present conflicting claims to truth and therefore only one can be true and be the true vehicle of salvation. The inclusivist acknowledges that the salvific process can take place outside of the Christian tradition, for example within each of the World Religions, but when this happens it is always due to the work of Christ. The pluralist view, on the other hand, is that so far as we know the different religious traditions form different human conceptions of ultimate reality and are potentially equally salvific. In debates about religious education exclusivists tend to claim that religious believers are largely exclusivists and so any other perspective on religion distorts the believer's perspective.

Cox (Hansard 1992, 254) identified four problem areas one of which she described as 'systematic attempts by representatives of the RE establishment to interpret the Act in terms that favour the thematic multi-faith approach which the amendments were designed to discourage'. A chief culprit of such an interpretation was, according to Cox, Professor John Hull of Birmingham University. However the Bishop of Ripon (Hansard 1992, 256) referred to another member of what he called 'Birmingham group'. This was Hick and the Bishop believed his pluralist hypothesis was 'inadequate to an understanding of the religions of the world' because 'the language, concepts and teachings of religious traditions differ profoundly'. The fact that Hick would not disagree that such concepts and teachings indeed do differ need not detain us at this point. What is significant, however, is that a particular interpretation (it might be more accurate to say misinterpretation) of Hick's pluralist hypothesis was being viewed as a theoretical underpinning of a thematic approach to RE, about which there had been considerable debate leading up to, and immediately after the 1988 Act. It was also an approach to religious education that was deeply unpopular with those who held very strong exclusivist views of their religious tradition. (For a discussion on this see Teece 1993; Grimmitt 2000, Chapter 1; Baumfield et al. 1995 and Wintersgill, 1995).

Because of this latter point, although not mentioning thematic teaching specifically, similar criticisms of Hick can be found in some recent religious education literature. This can be seen explicitly in Cooling (1994) and also more implicitly in the writings of Wright (1997; 1998, and 1999). What is most interesting about both these writers, and Cooling in particular, is that they, like the Bishop of Ripon, appear to link John Hick's pluralist hypothesis with well known scholars in the field of religious education. But what is the evidence for this? It is important now to examine these criticisms in detail.

7.3   Cooling's criticisms

One of Hick's most trenchant critics in the field of religious education is Trevor
Cooling. An evangelical Christian, Cooling believes that it is important to
critique Hick's work because 'of his influence on theories of religious
education' (Cooling 1994, 34). In what way does Cooling believe that Hick has
been so influential? Cooling devotes the whole of the first section of his book
to a criticism of modern, 'liberal' theories of RE. These he believes stem from
the educational philosophy of Paul Hirst and its consequential theory of liberal
education, with its ideals of rational autonomy and critical openness.
According to Cooling all liberal theories of religious education stem from this.
Cooling focuses his attention in this critique on the work of John Hull and
Michael Grimmitt. According to Cooling (1994, 14) both Hull and Grimmitt,
influenced by Hirst, subscribe to an 'anti-religious theory of knowledge'.

Such a theory of knowledge is antagonistic to 'traditional' forms of religious
belief. By traditional Cooling means absolutist. The theory of knowledge in
question is derived from Hirst's theory of 'forms' of knowledge. This claims
that there are various forms of knowledge which are objective in as much as
they have distinctive conceptual frameworks which are independent of culture
and belief, and have public criteria for testing truth. According to Hirst's later
working of this theory, religion does not constitute such a form as there are no
agreed public tests whereby true and false can be distinguished in religious
claims (Cooling 1994, 19). This leads, therefore, to scepticism with regard to
religious beliefs because whilst the 'objective' forms are uncontroversial and
certain, religion is controversial and uncertain.

Knowledge according to Hirst is external to the knower and is something that
must be discovered, mastered and learned through the traditional curriculum
disciplines based on his forms of knowledge theory. This relegates religion to
the private sphere and in Cooling's view religious belief falls prey to a form of
emotivism. The holding of religious beliefs boils down to a free choice of
individuals. So, according to Cooling, religious beliefs rather than comprising

a set of true propositions about reality are ways of describing human experience. Of course there is no reason why descriptions of human experience cannot contain true propositions. The problem though for an absolutist like Cooling is that 'descriptions of human experience' have an inevitable subjective element to them; in Kantian terms they are descriptions of the phenomenal world. For the absolutist, true propositions are those divinely revealed emanating from the noumenal world of the divine. So in one sense Cooling is agreeing with Hirst that knowledge is objective and independent of human subjectivity but on the other hand cannot accept Hirst's narrow positivism regarding what counts as criteria for testing truth.

Therefore on this Hirstian view religious education, because it can't be based on objective knowledge, is only acceptable if it allows pupils to make individual choices in the face of conflicting sets of beliefs: this cannot be demonstrated to be true or false.

7.3.1   Theology's role in theories of RE

Developing his argument, Cooling then goes on to discuss the role of theology in theories of RE. One of Cooling's major concerns is to argue that religious educators cannot pretend that they can articulate a rationale for the subject outside the bounds of theology, as for example, Netto (1989) attempted. Because Hull is one liberal religious educator who has consistently been concerned with the relationship between theology and education, Cooling makes a detailed critique of his work. In so doing, Cooling, at least implicitly, makes a link between Hull, Grimmitt, Hirst and Hick. Cooling argues that despite the best efforts of liberal theorists theology has a *necessary* role to play in theories of *religious* education. This is inescapable for even an atheist teacher of RE 'has to *do* theology by making some judgment on the significance of religious language, and what it means to hold a religious belief in a rational way' (Cooling 1994, 62). And because theology is inescapable in these terms Cooling is able to make the claim that pluralist theologies such as Hick's-although Hick would not describe his pluralist hypothesis as theology

but rather a philosophy of religion- have had a direct influence on modern liberal theories of RE. In effect what Cooling is doing here is, in his view, unmasking the hidden theological agenda lying behind the work of such as Grimmitt and Hull. And according to him it is a theology of a Hickian kind. This is interesting especially if one looks for direct references to Hick in the work of these writers. In the previous chapter I noted the one reference to Hick in Grimmitt's *Religious Education and Human Development* (1987)*, his major work upon which most of Cooling's criticisms are based. Direct references to Hick in Hull's work are similarly hard to find. Does this mean, therefore, that Cooling is implicitly accusing Hull and Grimmitt of being 'Anonymous Hickians'? The reference here is to Karl Rahner's inclusivist theology in which people of non-Christian religions can be 'saved' within their own tradition but such 'salvation' takes place due to the action of Christ, although they are unaware of this; hence they are 'Anonymous Christians'. I am suggesting something similar with regard to Cooling's linking of liberal religious educators with Hick. Their theological perspective is Hickian even though they don't necessarily know it. If my analysis is correct then this seems to me to be a rather outrageous inference.

7.3.2   Cooling's criticisms of Hick

If there are no substantial references to Hick in these works how then can Cooling make the link? Only, I contend, by misrepresenting Hick. To be fair to Cooling one of the difficulties with Hick's work is that Hick has, over the last three decades since first developing his pluralist hypothesis, constantly refined his thesis, often in the light of criticism from his theological and philosophical opponents. However this does not excuse two erroneous claims about Hick's work. The first false claim is to equate Hick with those liberal religious educators who Cooling claims are seeking to impose a liberal ideology on religious education. The second is to claim that Hick is a relativist. It is important to deal with both these

7.3.3 Hick as a liberal

The links, which Cooling appears to make between the work of Hull and Hirst, and Hull and Hick, is an epistemological one in the former case, a theological one in the latter case and an ideological one overall. In other words, liberal religious educators, such as Hull, are influenced by the epistemology of Hirst or at least what Hirst says about religion because, in Cooling's view, such a theory of knowledge introduces a subjective element to religious belief that contradicts the absolutist view. Consequently in theological terms, Hick must influence liberal religious educators such as Hull, because Hick promotes a pluralist hypothesis, which includes a subjective element in knowing, and rejects 'traditional' ideas of faith as being assent to divinely revealed propositions. And because Hirst, Hull and Hick are all judged to be liberals then they are at one in seeking to impose a post Enlightenment liberal ideology on education in Hirst's case, religious education in Hull's case and religion in Hick's case.

But such an argument cannot be sustained. Firstly Hick's epistemology is profoundly different from Hirst's. True Hick believes that there is a subjective element in religious faith but, unlike Hirst, Hick believes there is a subjective element in *all* knowing. Indeed Hick devotes a whole chapter of his *Faith and Knowledge* to criticising an infallibilist theory of knowledge in favour of one based on 'rational or adequately grounded certitude' (Hick 1957, 207). Secondly I have indicated above that there is little evidence to suggest that any liberal religious educator is influenced directly by Hick's theology. Because they could both be termed Christian liberals, there may be similarities between Hull's non-specific divergent theology and Hick's work but there is no recorded reference. When discussing the 'religiously committed religious educator' Hull (1984, 184) writes:

> The essential questions are: Does my religion help me to think for
> myself or does it require me to submit without question to authority?
> Does my religious commitment cause me to discover questions and do

the answers provided by my religion lead me to further questions?….Are the ideas of learning, autonomy and inquiry actually an integral part of my theological system? There are religious systems, theologies, which meet the test of these questions, and which actually give rise to such questions. Religiously committed teachers who want to be religious educators must find such theologies' [and if they cannot they may] 'become those with open minds and empty hearts, unable to connect their deepest religious values with their work .

Thirdly it is in the claim that liberal religious educators are writing from a theological position, even if they do not admit to this, that claims by such as Cooling (and Wright) are most misleading. This is because they claim to know what these theological positions are. In fact as noted in the previous chapter Grimmitt (1987, 257, 260-261) explains why he doesn't offer a theological rationale for religious education.

Cooling's point, of course, would be that, nevertheless, Grimmitt's approach *implies* (at least) some kind of theological perspective.

Cooling, and Wright echo the post-modern critics of pluralism, in general, and Hick in particular. They argue that theological pluralism is a meta-theory that has arisen out of the post Enlightenment liberal consensus. For example Surin uses the image of the MacDonald's hamburger to illustrate this pervasive influence that seeks culturally to flatten out in a homogenised sameness traditional cultures and their distinctiveness. This image also has political overtones of western imperialism. Liberalism, according to these critics, seeks to impose a secular, empiricist epistemology on everyone in the guise of tolerance in a culturally and religiously plural world (Surin 1990).

And for Cooling (1994, 17) such liberalism 'entails an exaggerated emphasis on scepticism and individualism that is threatening to traditional religious ways of life'. So pluralism puts the distinctiveness of the various religions at risk. This is a clever tactic by religious absolutists to attempt to undermine pluralist philosophies and theologies. But is it an effective tactic? For doesn't an

absolutist seek also to impose a meta-narrative on the different religious traditions? As Donovan (1993, 219) points out, 'a cynic might well be intrigued to see the descendants of Calvin and of the Inquisition joining forces with the disciples of Nietzsche to give a lesson on tolerance to the children of the Enlightenment!'. In other words absolutists are happy to align themselves with the relativists when it suits them. And it should be pointed out at this juncture that Hick rejects this claim (as noted in the previous chapter) by pointing to 'pluralist' themes in the world's religions, which are both outside (culturally and geographically) and prior to (historically) the Enlightenment.

Returning to the question of liberalism, a helpful distinction is provided by Donovan (1993, 220) when he makes the distinction between *ideological* and *epistemic* liberalism.[11] The former describes liberals who wish to promote a particular world-view, whilst the later is concerned with intellectual freedom and those who seek to apply 'conscientious application of the best scholarship….to the questions before them' (220). That Hick is such an *epistemic* liberal is described by Cheetham 2003, 174 and 132):

> Being a liberal, he borrows from many different disciplines: scientific, psychological, historical, philosophical and so on, and from all the major world faiths as well. His is a universal vision not content to stay within a carefully staked-out Christian discourse, but open to the whole world of religious experience' [but] 'he is not proposing a new global religion. In fact, Hick would be very uncomfortable with the idea that *we are all the same really*.

Neither Hull nor Hick would admit to being liberals in an ideological sense but could be classed as epistemic liberals. Surin's linking of religious pluralism with 'global capitalist ideology' would be vehemently opposed by Hull, for example, who denies any suggestion that he is in thrall to modernity and its supposed values (see for example, Hull 2002). Again it needs to be noted that

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[11] To be fair to Wright, in his later writings (for example Wright 2007) he makes a similar distinction to Donovan referring to ideological and political liberalism.

Hick repeatedly points out that religious pluralism pre dates modernism both culturally and historically.

In chapter five I argued that a case could be made for Hick's pluralism to be understood as a second order explanatory theory. Hick recognises and affirms difference in religion 'rather than seeking to bulldoze religions into the image of a 'first order' pluralistic religion' Cheetham (2003, 132-33). However it was also noted that a question arises as to how far Hick can be dispassionate and avoid *caring* about his theory and thus run the risk of it becoming a 'first order' commitment.

But as Cheetham (2003, 174) points out; 'for Hick, truth results from a cumulative amassing of data and experience, it does not arrive like a bolt of lightening'.

7.3.4   Hick as a relativist

The second major claim that Cooling makes about both liberal religious educators and Hick is that they are all relativists. He writes (1994, 34) 'it is widely assumed that sound religious education has to be based on some theory of religious relativism' and (1994, 47) there is 'a widespread tendency to adopt the Hickian view that there is one Reality that is experienced through a number of lenses'. And furthermore, what Cooling thinks of as Hickian relativism has been influential in religious education because 'the alternative of some form of absolutism has been seen to be abhorrent'.

But what sense can be made of Cooling's claim that Hick is a relativist? The key lies in the stark contrast that he makes between absolutism and relativism. Indeed at a seminar in the School of Education in the University of Birmingham in 2003 Cooling went as far to assert that both Hick and Hull, because not absolutists, are therefore non-realists!

So Cooling appears to be implying that religious realism can only be such if it is absolutist. This must be the case for how on any other, more subtle, view can he maintain his claim that Hick is a relativist? The term 'relativism' can be distinctly unhelpful because there are so many varieties of relativism (Kirk 1999). Hick claims to be a realist. And the difference between realists and relativists is that 'realists hold that reality is independent of our thinking, even if it is up to us how we think about it' whilst 'relativists disagree and hold that what there is, and what is true, depends on our point of view' (Kirk 1999, ix). It is true that in terms of Hick's epistemology knowledge of the world is relative to history, tradition and culture. This is so because all our knowing is mediated through our conceptual schema and we only experience the world as it appears to us. We don't actually experience the world as it is in itself. But as already noted, Hick has devoted his life's work to arguing for the *reality* of a religious experience based on the existence of a *real* divine source to that experience. As can be seen from the discussion in chapter five it is also true that Hick's understanding of such realism has changed over the years and that some of his critics accuse him of having reached the point where his claims for the Real are so empty as to be vacuous. Some have claimed that his understanding of the Real is no different to their being no real at all (For example see Hebblethwaite (1993, 130) where he quotes from a seminar discussion with Don Cupitt). But this needs arguing for and one suspects that Cooling has relied too much on some conservative critics of Hick rather than study the texts in the depth required. This reliance can be seen in the assertion (Cooling 1994, 36) that Hick believes that *all* religions are salvific. Does this mean, therefore that Hick is a *moral* relativist? This seems to be implied by one of Cooling's sources, Gavin D'Costa, who, in one article (D'Costa, 1996, 227), states that: 'Hick holds that all religions are paths to the "Real".' But Hick doesn't. Hick employs a soteriological/ethical criterion (see Hick 1989, 299-342):

> The basic criterion, then, for judging religious phenomena is
> soteriological. The salvation/liberation, which it is the function of
> religion to facilitate, is a human transformation, which we see most
> conspicuously in the saints of all traditions. It consists, as one of its

aspects, in moral goodness, a goodness which is latent in the solitary contemplative and active in the saint who lives in society, serving his or her fellows either in works of mercy or, more characteristically, in our modern socially-conscious age, in political activity as well, seeking to change the structures within which human life is lived. This stems in each case from a basic ethical requirement; and it is this that provides the criterion for the moral assessment of religious phenomena (Hick 1989, 309).

So according to Hick's pluralist hypothesis Nazism with its mass murder of Jews or the Aum Shin Rikyo cult that filled the Tokyo underground with sarin nerve gas are not authentic responses to the Real. D'Costa (1996) would claim that for Hick to make such a judgement means that logically pluralism must always be a form of exclusivism and that nothing called pluralism really exists. This is an extreme position and seems to imply that any one using criteria is an exclusivist. If this is the implication then it is a trivial point. Hick (2000, 171) maintains that religious exclusivism and religious pluralism are of different logical kinds, 'the one being a self-committing affirmation of faith and the other a philosophical hypothesis'. It is not 'another historical religion making an exclusive religious claim, but a meta-theory about the relation between the historical religions'. As such it is a second order explanatory framework.

It might be objected that whilst this may be so Hick does appear to be displaying relativistic tendencies when talking about the 'major' world religions. Badham (1991) points out that in *An Interpretation of Religion* Hick states that it is not possible from a human perspective to make judgements as to the superiority of one tradition over the other because judged by the soteriological/ethical criterion all appear equally efficacious in bringing about human transformation. However, the distinction that needs to be made here is between judging the overall salvific efficacy of a tradition and making moral judgements about particular details of a tradition. So, whilst it cannot be shown that Christianity is more salvific than Hinduism, it does not prevent the

Christian (nor Hick for that matter) from criticising the practice of suttee or for the Hindu to criticise the persecution of the Jews in Christian history.

So Hick is not a relativist in a non-realist sense and neither is he a moral relativist.

Perhaps he is a cultural relativist as after all he claims that human perception of the Real is mediated through different cultural traditions and this accounts for the differences in religions. But all conscious experience, including perception of the Real, is according to Hick, always and necessarily formed in terms of the concepts and images of a particular tradition. But this is not to say that this cultural construct is all that there is because the different experiences are humanly formed phenomenal experiences of the same noumenal reality. But this is only cultural relativism in a trivial sense (i.e. that human cultures are very different from each other and often embody different values). But Hick's view is not an example of cultural relativism as such because cultural relativism is a form of moral relativism and I have argued that Hick is not a moral relativist.

So what can be concluded from this? Firstly that Cooling's assertion that Hick has influenced theories of RE is weak. It may well be the case that Hull's and Hick's liberal Christian leanings mean that they have many things in common but any of the other claims of Cooling to link Hick and modern theories of education and religious education are very thin to say the least. But more importantly I have argued that Cooling misrepresents Hick by claiming that he is an ideological liberal and a relativist. Both are untrue and the holding of these untrue beliefs about Hick has been responsible, in part, for a failure of the RE profession to consider potential valuable insights from John Hick's work. This is also true regarding the criticisms of Hick by Andrew Wright.

7.4   Andrew Wright and the unearthing of the romantic hermeneutic

Wright like Cooling tends towards the view that in modern religious education there is a hidden or unexamined, or unrecognised hermeneutic. Whilst for Cooling it is expressed in terms of theological rationale, Wright (1997, 213) expresses this state of affairs in terms of a 'type of psychoanalysis' which seeks to 'draw into the conscious sphere the unconscious presuppositions with which many religious educators operate, or- as an act of exorcism it sought to name the demon'. It will be instructional to examine the nature of such a demon according to Wright because he explicitly refers to the work of Hick as being an outcome of the demon and as an element in the development of, in his view, an inappropriate form of religious education.

The demon is Romanticism. Wright traces the development, within theology, of what he terms a 'romantic hermeneutic'. This developed as a response to post Enlightenment modernity, especially historical criticism. In order to address the criticism that religious texts may be merely of antiquarian interest, the romantic hermeneutic, traced back to Schleiermacher, emphasised the centrality of personal human experience. So in order to avoid the pitfalls of a literal understanding of the Bible, which according to its critics produces 'bad science' rather than theological insight, the romantics emphasised the reading of biblical text as expression of religious experience, which bypasses the problems of literalism and offers the possibilities of a 'deeper, quasi allegorical, spiritual interpretation' (Wright 1997, 206). Thus the reading of the Bible offers no literal 'truths' about reality but profound insights into the realm of human experience. This, Wright believes, lays the foundation of a liberal interpretation of religion; an interpretation that has had in turn a profound effect on theories of religious education. It is interesting to trace Wright's subtle division of this 'romantic hermeneutic' into different and increasingly subtle forms of itself both in terms of how it developed in Christian theology and the corresponding outworkings in religious education.

Firstly a *hermeneutic of deletion* reduced religion to morality by stripping away supernatural elements and revealing the essence of Christianity to be ethical. Wright sees the influence of this in the work of Loukes (1961), in the development of 'life themes', and in particular in the work of Smith (1969). Basically the problem with this hermeneutic, in terms of both theology and its effects on religious education, is that it is reductionist.

Secondly a *hermeneutic of translation* understood religion to be more than morality. Rather than deleting the mythological elements of religion as in the hermeneutic of deletion, this approach sought, in Bultmann's term, to demythologise the language; in other words to translate the language from something that literally described a universe of supernatural realities to one that described these elements in symbolic form. Wright mentions Tillich in particular. The influence of this hermeneutic on RE can be seen, particularly, in the work of Goldman (1965) whose borrowing of Piaget's Cognitive Stage theory to explain why young children often fail to understand religious language rests on the prior assumption that religious language does not describe reality but is an expression of religious experience. The development of this hermeneutic led, according to Wright, to an increasingly sceptical attitude towards the cognitive value of religious language. It is at this point of Wright's account that he makes reference to Hick. And he does so, in my view, in a way that misrepresents and over simplifies Hick's work.

In Wright's view a *hermeneutic of transcendence* reinforced the view that religious language is non-essential (because open to translation) to religious experience. According to Wright the hermeneutic of transcendence reinforced the view that the only value of religious language is that it points beyond itself towards the religious encounter that it expresses and once that experience is grasped then the language becomes superfluous and can be transcended. Thus the language of all world faiths is contingent and culturally relative and serves not to express religious truth but acts as a signpost to an experiential dimension beyond language. This in turn points towards a universal theology 'in which religious language is culturally determined and loses all cognitive content' (Wright, 1997, 207). Wright's only reference to an example of such a

'universal theology' is to Hick's *God and the Universe of Faiths* and *An Interpretation of Religion*.

In his book *Spiritual Pedagogy* (1998) Wright traces how this dominant paradigm of Romanticism has influenced current conceptions of spirituality and religious education. In so doing he distinguishes between two contrasting definitions of spirituality offered by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) in a supplement to their discussion paper *Curriculum 11-16.* One was anthropological:

> The spiritual area is concerned with the awareness a person has of those elements in existence and experience which may be defined in terms of inner feelings and beliefs; they affect the way people see themselves and throw light for them on the purpose of meaning of life itself.

The other definition was theological:

> The spiritual area is concerned with everything in human knowledge or experience that is connected with or derives from a sense of God or of gods. Spirituality is a meaningless adjective for the atheist and of dubious use to the agnostic.

Wright (1998, 22) claims that the former, anthropological, definition has dominated educational thought and strongly influenced religious education. Although spirituality was given great emphasis in the 1988 Education Reform Act, its definition remains open to interpretation and, in Wright's view, defenders of a romantic definition of education have seized upon this anthropological definition and made it their own. This has enabled them to maintain a foothold for progressive, child-centred education within a context where the curriculum has become ever more 'traditional' and subject centred. Religious educators, in Wright's view have adopted a largely anthropological definition of spirituality in order to meet two problems; that of relevance and

that of the need for tolerance. So 'religious education was to represent religion in the classroom in a form capable of stimulating spiritual insight' (Wright 1998,30) and this was achieved by 'presenting religious traditions as secondary expressions of primary spiritual experience' (Wright 1998, 34) and this emphasis on experience, 'has priority over the academic study of the external representations of religious culture' (Wright 1998, 36).

He discusses at length the work of David Hay whom he sees as a significant proponent of such a view. He places Hay and his supporters within the 'romantic framework'[12]. For Wright (1998, 41), what is crucial to understand here is that in such an understanding of spirituality (where feeling and experience is given priority over reason) 'the cultural and linguistic context is always secondary to the primary *decontextualised* (my emphasis) experience'. In terms of religious education, this has led to a form of 'universal theology' in which 'all religious tradition (are seen as) culturally determined and equally valid expressions of a *common* (my emphasis) religious experience. It was no longer important if the doctrinal systems of different world faiths were in conflict with one another, since what mattered was not the reality they described but the experience they expressed' (Wright 1998, 70). In this context Wright refers to Hick's *God and the Universe of Faiths*. (See Wright 1998, 70 and 1999, 21).

However it needs to be pointed out that this is fundamentally not what Hick is saying. Take for example Hick's comments in *The Second Christianity* (Hick 1983, 86: and noted in chapter five of this thesis). He refers to complementarity; human experience in different religious traditions may be complementary in some way but it is not identical.

An objection to this might claim that in using the word common Wright is merely pointing to the view, evident in Hick, that his pluralist hypothesis

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[12] Recently Wright has modified this view stating, 'It is, in retrospect, unfortunate that many critics-myself included-responded negatively to his universal theology, emphasising inner feelings, and focus on the individual, and in doing so failed to recognise his fundamental concern to rehabilitate the question of the relationship between spiritual experience and the ultimate order of things (Wright 2007, 95).

understands religious traditions as culturally determined phenomena arising in particular times and places in response to the same transcendent reality. If that is what he is saying then one cannot criticise it as an account of Hick's work. But it appears that if he is saying this then he is also saying something else; that is by using the word 'common' he is at least implying that at base level religious experience is all the same. This is a common misconception of Hick, even amongst scholars who are basically supportive of Hick's work. For example, Badham (1990, 13) writes: 'Nevertheless Hick believes there is a common underlying experience, and a common soteriological efficacy, in each of the world's great religions.' Badham may well be correct in attributing the soteriological point to Hick but not in his point about experience.

So to say that all religious people experience the same divine reality is not to say that all experience is the same. And neither is it saying that it is 'no longer important if the doctrinal systems of different world faiths (are in) conflict with one another' (Wright 1998, 70). This is an over simplification of Hick's views and it is an error on Wright's part to place Hick's work as a pluralist theological outgrowing from the 'romantic' line of thought that he has drawn. Superficially Hick's views seem very similar to Hay's but Hick's view is subtler. Firstly Hick is not saying that all religious experience is the same because each person's experience of the divine is interpreted in the historical cultural forms of various religious traditions. This has to be so because we do not experience reality as such but always through the 'lenses' of our inherited conceptual schema. So this in turn leads, on the surface at least, to potentially conflicting accounts of experience. Hick doesn't deny the reality of conflicting truth claims, and he certainly hasn't sought to ignore them. Rather the question is as to how significant are such accounts of experience with their potentially conflicting claims to truth to his own interpretation of religion as something that is transformative of human experience from self-centredness to reality centredness. Neither does Hick say that differences in religious truth claims are never important. To accuse Hick of this is to fall into the same trap as D'Costa and Cooling (mentioned above). Crucially Hick has an ethical criterion, which enables him to be more discriminating about 'truth' than many of his critics give him credit for. What Wright is ignoring is Hick's own account

of his work as resting on a critical realist view of religion. It is a different understanding of critical realism to Wright's view because Hick's view of religious faith is that it consists of a person's total interpretation of an ambiguous universe in religious terms. Such a view conflicts with Wright's and Cooling's view of religious faith as being rooted in the more traditional account of religious faith as being assent to propositional revelation.

7.5   Conclusion

> Human beings use symbol, myth and story not to create a private communal reality, but to try to make sense of the world as it actually is. This entails a realism that is not naïve: reality is complex, and simply labelling its parts cannot do it justice. A complicated world, if it is to be adequately comprehended, demands an elaborate linguistic system, in which metaphor, model and narrative are necessary components. The diversity of worldviews offers a plurality of conflicting accounts of one world. However, this does not lead to relativism, since it is possible to make informed-if provisional and contingent-judgements between alternative accounts of reality (Wright 1997, 204).

It is difficult to see how Hick would disagree with this passage from Wright. Critics of Hick in RE have based their criticisms of their understanding of his pluralist hypothesis, which I have argued cannot be adequately understood as an *experiential-expressive* model of religion (Lindbeck 1984). Rather, like Wright, Hick sets his hypothesis within critical realism.

Cooling links Hick with liberal religious educators but, I have argued, such an argument breaks down under critical scrutiny.

Notwithstanding all of this, to concentrate on the conclusions to Hick's pluralist hypothesis misses the point. It has distracted religious educators from appreciating what is valuable in Hick's interpretation of religion for RE. In misinterpreting Hick, critics in RE have rendered any consideration of the

potential of his work for religious education to be a closed question in as much as it has already been analysed and found wanting. In the following chapter I aim to illustrate how Hick's religious interpretation of religion, when understood as a second order explanatory framework can help religious educators develop a distinctive approach to teaching and learning in RE.

8. How John Hick's religious interpretation of religion can inform and enrich current understandings of the nature and purpose of religious education

8.1 Introduction

My concern in this thesis is to address the issue of how religious education might reflect the *religious* nature of its content and so claim to be a distinctive subject on the curriculum. Having argued that Hick's religious interpretation of religion stands up to critical scrutiny as a second order explanatory framework it is my the contention that such a framework can positively inform religious educators' understanding of the often debated and misunderstood terms of learning about and from religion as liberally used in RE syllabuses. In so doing Hick's work forms a revisionist approach to the established paradigm of Smartian phenomenology. It is not the intention to replace phenomenological study of religion but to offer, in the light of recent criticism, some new insights into how the established pattern of thinking about multi-faith RE might be enhanced and made appropriate to a subject that, in my opinion, is looking for fresh insights into how it might make a distinctive contribution to the 21st century curriculum.

The time has come, therefore, to consider in appropriate detail how insights from Hick can be applied to the ongoing research issue about the nature and aims of RE. In chapter two I charted the evolution of religious education in terms of its changing aims and in chapter three I made a case for why it is important to re-open questions about how best religious educators might re-conceptualise the study of religion in RE.

In this context there are a number of aspects to the debate about the nature of the subject. These are, a reluctance to define religion; a view that religion is being misrepresented in RE; and that, due to the marginalisation of theology, the essentially *religious* nature of its subject matter has been secularised in

religious education. In applying insights from Hick to these issues it is hoped that we may move the debate forward in a helpful way. However, there is a prior issue that needs clarifying as it is not possible to come to any secure understanding of how religion might be interpreted within the subject of religious education until it can be agreed as to what is the purpose of the subject.

When discussing the *pedagogical principles* of RE. Grimmitt (2000, 17) says:

> All pedagogical models of RE are expressions of certain assumptions about how education and religion can be brought into a relationship within the context of a secular educational system. These assumptions are based upon a particular view of religion and of education; indeed they *combine* a particular view of religion(s) with a particular view of education.

A major problem with discussing *a particular view of religion(s)* when discussing religious education *per se* as opposed to a particular pedagogical approach to the subject, is that over the years, especially since the development of multi-faith religious education, the subject has accumulated a variety of aims each of which, according to Everington (2000, 184) represent a different view of the subject. She goes on to outline a 'broad consensus' about the established aims for RE that, ironically, does not in any way represent a broad consensus about the purpose of the subject.

8.2   A consensus on aims but no consensus on purpose

If one examines the aims of RE in post 1988 Agreed Syllabuses as well as 'official' documents such as the 1994 SCAA Model Syllabuses and the 2004 Non Statutory National Framework for RE, it is clearly evident that Everington is correct in saying that there is a broad agreement as to the aims of RE. She lists them (Everington 2000, 184-185) as:

- Acquiring and developing knowledge and understanding of Christianity and the other principal religions represented in Great Britain;
- Developing the ability to make reasoned and informed judgements about religious and moral issues;
- Enhancing pupils' spiritual, moral, cultural and social development by: developing awareness of the fundamental questions of life raised by human experiences, responding to such questions with reference to the teachings and practices of religions to their own understanding and experience; reflecting on their own beliefs, values and experiences in the light of their study;
- Developing a positive attitude towards other people, respecting their right to hold different beliefs from their own and towards living in a society of diverse religions.

However there is a difference between stating the aims for a subject and articulating the subject's purpose and an examination of the above aims forces one to conclude that they represent three distinct views of the purpose of RE. Everington (2000, 185-186) states these as:

1. The purpose of religious education is to enable pupils to gain knowledge and understanding of religion(s).
2. The purpose of religious education is to promote understanding of and respect for people whose cultures and beliefs are different from one's own and to promote a positive attitude towards living in a plural society.
3. The purpose of religious education is to promote the personal, moral and spiritual development of pupils.

When examining these three 'purposes' of the subject the immediate question that springs to mind is, does this list represent three distinct purposes of *one* subject called religious education? If so how are they related to each other in an overall conception of the nature and purpose of the subject? An alternative question is, does this list represent *three different subjects*; the first being an academic study of religious traditions, a school based version of the

academic, multi disciplinary subject called Religious Studies; the second a form of citizenship education with an overall aim of social cohesion; the third a form of personal, moral and spiritual education?

These are important questions because without answers to them it is difficult to see how it is possible to come to any agreement as to the 'purpose, identity and direction of the subject' (Everington 2000, 183). Furthermore neither is it possible to explore adequately how the study of religion might be understood if there is such a lack of clarity about the essential nature of the RE.

A factor that I have not addressed in this thesis is the fact that the development of RE has often been subject to political influence. This was a deliberate choice and is a subject for exploration in its own right but it is interesting to mention at this point that due to wider political influences one of the above purposes of the subject has been in vogue at different times. For example arising out Smart's 'phenomenological' approach to RE, the Swann Report (HMSO 1985, 465-539) recommended the phenomenological approach as being the best vehicle for 'preparing *all* (emphasis in original) pupils' for life in a pluralist society' (465). This echoes the second purpose mentioned above. However following on from the 1988 Education Reform Act, the religious clauses of which were surrounded by a vehement debate about the place of Christianity in RE and the requirement from RE to have more of a *religious* aim, the 1990s saw the focus shift to the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils. Indeed this became a major focus of the first OfSTED inspection framework for inspecting schools. More recently OfSTED (2007) has praised the progress made by RE in a number of areas, for example:

> At its best RE equips pupils very well to consider issues of community cohesion, diversity and *religious understanding* (my emphasis). It contributes significantly to pupils' academic progress and their personal development (OfSTED 2007, 5).

However despite this progress OfSTED identifies 'weaknesses' which include the statement:

> The curriculum and teaching in RE do not place sufficient emphasis on exploring the changing political and social significance of religion in the modern world. As a result, the subject's potential to contribute to community cohesion, education for diversity and citizenship is not being fully realised (OfSTED 2007, 7).

What does this tell us about the prevailing view of the curriculum subject religious education? In all these cases the answer is that the study of religion in RE is *instrumental* to broader educational aims. In Everington's second purpose, RE is conceived as *instrumental* to the social aim of community cohesion. In the third purpose RE is seen as *instrumental* to the broader curriculum aim of pupils' personal development within a view that understands education to be, primarily, about human development.

For the purposes of this thesis it will be argued that in terms of clarifying a workable aim for RE the three purposes outlined above require prioritising. It is unrealistic, for example, to ignore the potential for RE to contribute to social cohesion as it is unrealistic to ignore the importance of the subject for pupils' spiritual and moral development. However, if we are to articulate a workable aim then it requires religious educators to prioritise one of these purposes and it is the one concerned with pupils' spiritual and moral development that affords most opportunity to conceptualise a distinctive nature for their subject. Drawing on Hick the distinctiveness of religion is a way of understanding the world based on the notion of transcendence. Consequently an interpretation of religion that follows from this affords a helpful way to understand the subject that makes a distinctive contribution to the curriculum. So in this context I take the view that pupils' spiritual and moral development is the main purpose of RE. It is then possible to conceive of the above three purposes not necessarily as three different subjects but as complementary aims in the following way:

- The purpose of RE is to promote the personal, moral and spiritual development of pupils (main aim);

- The purpose of RE is to enable pupils to gain knowledge and understanding of religion(s) (instrumental aim);

- The purpose of RE is to promote understanding of and respect for people whose cultures and beliefs are different from one's own and to promote a positive attitude towards living in a plural society (consequential aim).

Of course one cannot guarantee that the first two aims will result in the third outcome but it is difficult to see how understanding and respect can be the main aim for the subject. One cannot make people understand and respect others any more than one can make them happy. Respect, understanding and, indeed, happiness are the possible consequences of something else.

Having made a case for prioritising the aims that RE has accumulated over the years the question that now requires addressing is how should the study of religion be understood in a way that best enables these aims to be achieved? The first thing that needs re-emphasising is that, as can be seen above, the study of religion is *instrumental* in this approach. It is instrumental to the requirement to contribute to pupils' spiritual and moral development with the possibility that this may contribute to a greater understanding not only of their own beliefs and values but to others' beliefs and values and hence make a contribution to social cohesion. But what understanding of religion can contribute most effectively to this in a way that enables RE to be seen as a distinctive contribution; that it is not, for example, just a form of citizenship or social education?

8.3   A reluctance to define religion

From the analysis in the last section it is perhaps understandable that 'official' documents in RE have always been reluctant to define religion. As noted in chapter three *The Non Statutory National Framework for RE* (QCA 2004, 8) refers to religious understanding but offers no definition or description of what this might be. Similarly it was noted in the quotation from OfSTED (2007, 7) above, that RE contributes effectively to pupils' religious understanding but there is no indication in the report of what this might consist. One suspects what is meant is that pupils come to learn about the major religious traditions of the world. A hint of this and evidence of the reluctance to offer a clear statement about how religion may be understood in religious education can be seen in the National Framework's 'Importance of Religious Education' statement (QCA 2004, 7). This was included in the section on the evolution of religious education. For ease of reference I repeat the statement below:

> The importance of religious education:
>
> Religious education provokes challenging questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, beliefs about God, the self and the nature of reality, issues of right and wrong, and what it means to be human. It develops pupils' knowledge and understanding of Christianity, other principal religions, other religious traditions, and other world-views that offer answers to these challenging questions. It offers opportunities for personal reflection and spiritual development. It enhances pupils' awareness and understanding of religious beliefs, teachings, practices and forms of expression, as well as of the influence of religion on individuals, families, communities and cultures.
>
> Religious education encourages pupils to learn from different religions, beliefs, values and traditions while exploring their own beliefs and questions of meaning. It challenges pupils to reflect on, consider, analyse, interpret and evaluate issues of truth, belief, faith and ethics and to communicate their responses.

Religious education encourages pupils to develop their sense of identity and belonging. It enables them to flourish individually within their communities and as citizens in a diverse society and global community. Religious education has an important role in preparing pupils for adult life, employment and life long learning. It enables them to develop respect and sensitivity to others, in particular those with faiths and beliefs different from their own. It promotes discernment and enables pupils to combat prejudice.

Many teachers of religious education would probably recognise this as an accurate articulation of good practice in terms of the process of religious education. But does it define what is distinctive about religious education? Some might answer in the affirmative asking where else in the curriculum is there a place for pupils to engage with these questions and issues? And this is a fair question. But is this *necessarily* the case? Do students have to study *religious* education to study beliefs about God? Cannot and do not sociologists, historians and anthropologists study such matters? Does not literature offer ample opportunities to study what it means to be human? One could ask similar questions about the other claims for religious education contained in this statement. Interestingly, what the 'Importance of Religious Education' statement does not do is offer a statement about what is distinctive about religion as a way of understanding the world. This is not the case, for example, in science in the National Curriculum. The corresponding 'Importance of' statement for science states that;

The importance of science:

The study of science fires pupils' curiosity about phenomena in the world around them and offers opportunities to find explanations. It engages learners at many levels, linking direct practical experience with scientific ideas. Experimentation and modelling are used to develop and evaluate explanations, encouraging critical and creative

thought. Pupils learn how knowledge and understanding in science are rooted in evidence. They discover how scientific ideas contribute to technological change-affecting industry, business and medicine and improving quality of life. They trace the development of science worldwide and recognise its cultural significance. They learn to question and discuss issues that may affect their own lives, and directions of societies and the future of the world.

The science statement makes a case for the distinctiveness of science as an academic discipline that views the world from a particular perspective and employs certain types of methodology in its study, with the emphasis being on the study of phenomena and their explanation based on evidence.

Religious Education does not benefit from similar treatment; it appears to avoid the former and launch straight into the latter. So pupils do not study religion as such but religious education. Felderhof (2004, 246) recently made this point –'as if [it] was an object of study in its own right'. And of course it was noted in chapter three that the same point has been made over time by Newbigin (1977), Moran (1989) and Copley (2005).This, of course, avoids a certain degree of controversy. By avoiding making a statement as to what is distinctive about a religious perspective on the world, religious educators avoid the complex and controversial debates about explanations of religion as understood in religious studies (See for example, Clarke and Byrne, 1993). There may be good reasons for this but the downside is that a case is not made for the subject's distinctiveness, particularly in relation to the other humanities subjects. This has a debilitating effect on the subject that makes it not only prey to integration into areas like citizenship but, even worse, its extinction because without a statement of distinctiveness of the subject, religious educators may find that 'if we do not choose priorities, they choose us and their effects are inescapable' (Watson 1992, 1). Not only that, assumptions are made about how religion is understood in RE by those who want to criticise it and these assumptions may not be an accurate reflection of

what is in fact the case and may distort the debate about the subject's distinctiveness and hinder its progress in the development of effective pedagogies.

8.4   *The misrepresentation of religion*

I outlined in chapter three why the question of the distinctiveness of religious education is not a new question and it is possible to argue that this has been the great-unresolved question for religious educators. Whilst it is generally accepted that the rationale for RE must have its basis in a secular education system with a critical and open concept of education being the first order activity and so answering clearly the first part of Grimmitt's formula (above) for stating a clear pedagogical principle, the best way to interpret religion in that formula is highly contested and has formed the subject matter of much of current philosophical debate in the religious education literature.

In essence the most recent significant contributions to the subject have been concerned that religious education needs to look beyond phenomenology for the perspectives from which its subject matter is viewed. Interestingly this concern does not depend on any particular philosophical or pedagogical position. For example the concern is evident in the writings, to some extent, of Andrew Wright (1993) and a greater extent in Philip Barnes (for example Barnes 2001 and 2009) because the phenomenological approach in religious education has tended to pre-package religion and deny pupils the opportunity to engage with questions of truth; of Michael Grimmitt (2000) because the popularity of phenomenology has tended to result uncritical and limited pedagogies that merely describe and label religious phenomena; and of Robert Jackson (1997) because phenomenology can produce inaccurate representations of religion and culture.

8.5   Religion, Religious education and truth claims

Barnes has presented the most forthright philosophical critique of the
phenomenological approach. This was summarised in chapter three but the
key points that Barnes makes about the misrepresentation of religion in RE
are that its 'ruling model' (Barnes 2009, 13) is governed by phenomenology
and a liberal protestant 'creed' that views all religions as of equal salvific
value. This, according to Barnes, misrepresents religion as understood by
most adherents. Hence RE indoctrinates students in this universal account of
religion. Barnes' 'educational', as opposed to 'theological' rationale seeks to
take religious difference seriously. So, according to Barnes' view, students
need to be confronted by and engage with a range of religious doctrines and
their claims to truth. The importance of 'truth claims' is also a central concern
of Wright (for example Barnes and Wright 2006). Indeed the view that
religions are 'about truth claims' and that an engagement with such claims
should form a central component of RE has developed into a new form of
orthodoxy.

Wright (2007) has presented the most sophisticated argument for the
importance of truth claims in RE. He first of all draws on the work of Douglas
Porpora. Porpora suggests that humans acquire their identities in social,
moral and metaphysical space. However there is a modern tendency both in
the academic world and amongst the public at large, to situate identity entirely
in social space. In other words, we tend to develop the idea of who we are in
terms of a network of relationships 'with family, friends, acquaintances and
work colleagues' (Wright 2007, 1). This results in a 'contraction of meaning'.
Moral space is only relevant in terms of how it impacts on social space and
metaphysical space is disregarded. In other words people do not understand
their lives within a context that includes a moral dimension which is inexorably
informed and conceptually grounded in a larger worldview. So:

> Our worldviews operate in metaphysical space, providing answers to
> questions about the meaning and purpose of life and the ultimate order

of things. Further, 'because worldviews make claims about what is, they ineluctably raise questions of truth', questions that 'move us into the space of critical argument' (Wright 2007, 1-2).

However, in a similar way to Hick, Wright adopts a critical realist perspective which states that our understanding of the world is only partial, that there is an epistemic distance between reality as it is in itself and our perceptions of reality. So our empirical experience is related to ontological and metaphysical reality although our knowledge is only partial. Wright makes a distinction between the *empirical domain*, the *actual domain* and the *real domain*.

> The *empirical domain* consists of all that we ever experience. The *actual domain* consists of the totality of objects and events in the world-including our experiences-that exist and occur, regardless of whether we are aware of them or not. The *real domain* consists of the totality of objects, events and experiences, together with the forces and mechanisms that make them possible, and which have the potential to generate new configurations of the actual world (Wright 2007, 10).

He uses the experience of getting caught in a thunderstorm in London as an example. He has first hand experience of the weather (empirical domain). However he can't experience the totality of the weather in the world. So the actual weather cannot be totally experienced; if it is sunny in Paris it will be whether I experience it or not. But at a deeper level the reality of the weather are the mechanisms that cause the weather; chemical reactions in the sun, temperature changes, pressure in earth's atmosphere etc.

Without getting too deeply involved in Wright's argument, the view that reality is far greater than our experience in social space is shared by Hick and is fundamental to current debates about RE. Arguably it is the limiting of religious education to human experience as defined by our experience in social space, only, that has caused the critics of modern RE to take up their pens. See for example Newbigin (1977, 105) and Teece (2008).

However to limit this to the notion of truth claims potentially distorts and misrepresents religions.

If Wright (2007, 18) is correct - and there are many who agree with him (for example Copley 2008, 211-212) that religious education should be concerned with the pursuit of truth and a religious education concerned with truth 'must also address the challenge of how to live life truthfully-that is to say in harmony with ultimate reality' (Wright 2007, 14), and recognising that there are many contested and contradictory views of the nature of ultimate reality, then to limit RE to an engagement with 'truth claims' is to unnecessarily narrow the conception of religion and, possibly, to distort individual religions. Smart (1968)-as noted in chapter three-warned against this narrowing by insisting that RE will be unbalanced if the historical and parahistorical dimensions don't inform each other. Furthermore Doble (2010), in offering a critique of Barnes, has challenged him to answer the following questions; how are truth claims to be selected? How are they to be understood? In what context are they to be studied? How are pupils expected to evaluate them? Indeed as Doble (2010,176) points out, the 'relatively modern term 'religion' embraces far more than beliefs and doctrines, and simply atomising beliefs fails to capture the experience of living *both* in community with its 'relatively' shared vision, value system, spirituality, customs and mores, *and* in a global community of diverse communities.'

Moreover as Armstrong (2009) has argued when writing about the Semitic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, faith, historically speaking, has always been a matter of practical insight and active commitment (conceptualisations and visions of ultimate reality were understood in the realm of *mythos* and had little do with abstract belief or theological conjecture-*logos*). Armstrong informs us that Judaism and Islam have remained religions of practice; they promote orthopraxy; right practice, rather than orthodoxy; right teaching. Interestingly Strhan (2010, 39) gives an example of a member of a local synagogue explaining to her Year 7 class that he does not pray

because he believes in God but because his father did it and his father before that and so on. He states: 'Doing this is holy for me because it carries on that tradition.'

Christianity, however, began to move in a different direction in the early fourth century-developing preoccupation with doctrinal correctness (Armstrong 2009, 103-04). And of course some modern developments within Islam have broken with the historically correct view that the concept of belief is alien to Islam. As Armstrong (2009, 101) writes: 'Theological speculation that results in the formulation of abstruse doctrines is dismissed as *zannah* –self indulgent guesswork about matters that nobody can prove one way or the other but which makes people quarrelsome and stupidly sectarian.'

She notes (2009, 101): 'The fundamental message of the Qur'an was not a doctrine but an ethical summons to practically expressed compassion: it is wrong to build a private fortune and good to share your wealth fairly and create a just society where poor and vulnerable people are treated with respect.' The five pillars are a *miqra* (a calling to action). In Islam *iman* (faith) is what you do. As Mitch Albom's ageing Rabbi says in *Have a Little Faith* (2009, 44) 'faith is about doing. You are how you act, not just how you believe'.

An objection to this may well claim that although not a doctrine, such an ethical summons does represent some form of claim to truth and it would be difficult to disagree with that.

8.5.1   Different kinds of truth claims

However not all 'truth claims' are of the same nature. Let us take an example from Wright. He states:

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At the heart of religion's concern with ultimate truth stands the 'ontological' question: 'How does it come about that the universe exists? 'Why is there something rather than nothing?'; 'Is there anything beyond space and time?' (Wright, 1993, 51)

But to use the term 'religion' in this passage is problematic.

It is useful to refer to Hick for enlightenment on this issue. Quite obviously religions do make truth claims and Hick helpfully distinguishes between different kinds of such claims. (Hick 1989, 362-376; 1993, 105-118). Firstly religions make historical truth claims and these can conflict in three ways. Firstly claims such as, 'Jesus rose on the third day after his crucifixion' conflict not only with Islam but with secular historians who tend to discount miracle stories as historical evidence. It is the difference between saying, 'Christ rose from the dead' and 'Christians believe that Jesus rose from the dead'. Secondly there are claims which conflict between traditions, such as, 'Jesus died on the cross' where the Christian claim conflicts with the Muslim claim that he did not die on the cross. The only other such conflict that Hick believes is possible to find is the account in the Torah that Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac against the Qur'anic account that it was Ishmael. Thirdly there are intra faith conflicts such as to whether the Theravada or Mahayana tradition of Buddhism is truest to the original teachings of Buddha.

Of course for some believers historical truth claims form the essence of their faith but *this is not so for all believers*. So a question to ask is to what extent should they form the contours of religious education particularly as such conflicts are unlikely ever to be settled?

Another category of truth claims identified by Hick is 'trans-historical'. Hick is referring here to claims for which in principle there is a true answer but one that cannot be established by historical or other empirical evidence. Some of these are tradition specific but there are also claims that are a response to universal questions. One such example would be, is the universe eternal or

did it have a beginning? The conflict here tends to be between the traditions of Indian origin and those of Semitic origin. The former tend towards the view that the nature of the universe is beginningless and endless whilst the latter tend towards the view that it is the work of a creator God. Of course it might be the case that cosmologists will one day answer the question once and for all. But will such an answer make a *religious* difference? Will it settle the argument as to whether the world was created or not? The answer is no. Therefore just as Hick questions whether the ability to find an answer to this question makes a difference soteriologically (Hick 1993b, 52-54), religious educators could ask the question, with regard to religious education, as to how far this question is important for religious believers and whether it is something on which young people should spend a lot of lesson time. Armstrong (2009) would say that such questions are not the proper concern of religions anyway.

However it needs to be recognised that, as far as it is possible to talk about religions as ideological or theological systems, the particular claims to truth *that are deemed significant* by religious believers varies both between traditions and within traditions.

For example, although Buddhists may experience the world in terms of transcendence and interpret this as an impersonal absolute which potentially conflicts with a personal concept of deity as held by most Christians, what 'lies at the heart of religion' for most Buddhists is not the 'ontological question', as identified by Wright-for this is *avyakata*, Buddha's Doctrine of 'Undetermined Questions'-but a question such as how can we untie the knot of suffering? Similarly some Christians, those for whom the social gospel is paramount, may regard a question such as how can we ensure justice for all people in the world? as more pressing than the 'ontological' question. And, arguably, for many Hindus a concern about 'truth claims' is subordinate to a concern for the proper practice of their *dharma*; right practice in both ethical and ritualistic terms rather than right theory. As already noted Armstrong makes the same point about Judaism and Islam.

Thus religious educators must be careful here not to impose an interpretation of religion that is essentially western and rationalistic on the way that religions are understood in RE. This, surely, is as dangerous as the imposition of a liberal post Enlightenment framework, of which Barnes believes religious educators are guilty.

There is a real danger with the current insistence that truth claims represent an accurate and authentic representation of religion in RE because religions could be presented as being in conflict with one another when in fact, in many cases, their major concerns are not in conflict but have a different emphasis or concern. Indeed, it may be argued that any conflict is more likely to arise from a particular religion's 'religious' (i.e. informed by transcendence) view of, for example, human suffering or social justice, as opposed to a naturalistic or 'secular' perspective.

It could be objected that an ideal form of religion is being assumed here and that this in itself is romantic and paternalistic. There is indeed a danger of this and to present the major religious traditions as equally valid manifestations of the Real and therefore equally salvific would be to fall into such a trap. (Hick 1989; 1999). Such a destination point may be an unacceptable basis on which to base religious education. But this is only one, albeit a major, strand within Hick's religious pluralism and it is unwise to reject Hick's contribution wholesale.

So to conclude this section. It is important to recognise the substance of Wright's argument, for example in his later work, about the need for RE to address what religious traditions understand about ultimate reality. Where I diverge from the views of Barnes and Wright is that in following Hick I would question the strong claim made by both of them that the different understandings of reality that we find amongst the religions are as incompatible as they suggest. I have suggested that such a view of incompatibility may derive from an unhelpful narrowing of our understanding of religion into being essentially about doctrine. So might it be helpful to retire the rather myopic concentration on 'truth claims' and perhaps use a phrase

such as 'visions of reality' to describe the importance of engaging students with the teaching and practices of the religious traditions-which involve far more than merely a set of doctrinal claims. Wright states:

> To reach a depth of understanding of religion thus involves not achieving insight into religious experience, but reaching an understanding of the world view a religion holds, of its specific claims to religious truth' (1993, 72).

But it would be wrong to equate 'religious truth' merely with doctrine and, as Smart warned, over forty years ago (Smart 1968,) without a sensitive understanding of religious experience there is a real danger of dismissing religious 'truth' claims as outmoded and not relevant to the world of young people today (For an interesting discussion of how many young people have a narrow understanding of religious claims about Jesus see Walshe-Aylward 2009). Indeed one answer to Doble's (2010, 176) question to Barnes about who has chosen these doctrines and framed these truth claims is to make the point that any presenting of 'truth claims' must be made in the context of religious practice and experience.

To reinforce this point and to conclude the section it is interesting to point out that one doesn't have to be a religious believer to appreciate this point. As Marxist academic Terry Eagleton writes:

> The Christian way of indicating that faith is not in the end a question of choice is the notion of grace. Like the world itself from a Christian viewpoint, faith is a gift. This means among other things that Christians are not in conscious possession of all the reasons why they believe in God. But neither is anyone in conscious possession of all the reasons they believe in keeping fit, the supreme value of the individual, or the importance of being sincere. Only ultrarationalists imagine they need to be. Because faith is not wholly conscious, it is uncommon to abandon it simply by taking thought. Too much else would have to be altered as

well. It is not usual for a life- long conservative suddenly to become a revolutionary because a thought has struck him (Eagleton 2009, 138).

8.6   *Pluralism as a second order framework*

Despite their criticism of modern RE as a form of liberal universalising confessionalism which does not in the view of Barnes and Wright respect the actual plurality of views about religion, they both argue for the importance of taking the fact of plurality seriously. Although Wright criticises a universalising tendency within religious pluralism, he does not reject the idea of pluralism out of hand. Instead he calls for a 'qualitative pluralism' that does not privilege any single vantage point on religions but seeks to present religions from the point of view of a plurality of perspectives (Wright 2001). He likens this particular version of pluralism to the concept of 'positive pluralism' (Cush and Francis 2001). This is a perspective that claims that there are 'useful insights and helpful teachings in all traditions' (Cush and Francis 2001, 53). This is, of course, not the same as saying that such teachings are all the same or equally valid.

This type of pluralism is evident in Hick's work and as such is a valuable contribution to RE. Ward (1990; 1994) refers to this as 'soft pluralism'. This includes, the insight that there is a divine reality which is infinite, and beyond human comprehension in its essential nature but nevertheless discloses something of that nature as it stands in relation to us in many religious traditions. In many (though not all) of these traditions human beings aim to overcome a self, or ego centred life in relation to a supreme object of value which promises spiritual liberation or human transformation. Consequently no one religious tradition has the completeness of truth about this supreme reality, and that it is wise and helpful for religious believers to look to other traditions to inform and complement their own (Ward 1990, 16). Ward believes that 'soft pluralism' as evident in Hick's work is coherent and worthy of consideration in contrast to 'hard pluralism' and 'revisionist pluralism'. The former appears to stress the apparently contradictory claims that the supreme

reality is unknowable but that all (at least all the major) traditions manifest that reality in equally valid and authentic ways. The latter asks too much of religious believers to radically revise their doctrines in the light of modern scholarship and inter faith understanding (Ward 1990, 16-17).

Central to Hick's thesis, of course, is that at the heart of religion lies the idea of human transformation (Hick, 1989; 1999). Taking 'soft pluralism' seriously would mean that in religious education pupils study religion critically and develop their understanding of what it means to be human in a religiously ambiguous world (Grimmitt 1987, 2000: Teece 1997: 2001, 13-23).

One might refer to this kind of pluralism as 'procedural' in that *it informs the process of the subject but does not exclusively define the content.* It is thus a *second order activity* rather than a first order commitment. That any interpretation of religion operates as a second order explanatory framework rather than a first order commitment is a necessary requirement if the aims of critical religious education are to be fulfilled.

Cheetham's (2003) helpful distinction between pluralism as a second order explanatory thesis on the plurality of religions and pluralism as a first order religious commitment was noted in chapter five. Of course it was also noted that, what we see in Hick's work, arguably, is a sliding back and forth (despite his insistence that his is an explanatory hypothesis) between these two positions and it is this that may account for the different 'pluralisms' within his thesis.

8.7   *Explanatory frameworks and the inevitability of reductionism*

Organising the phenomena of religion into curriculum structures necessarily requires some form of reductionism. In chapter five I explored Proudfoot's (1985) two possible forms of reductionism- *descriptive reductionism* and *explanatory reductionism*. Smart is also aware of this issue. He provides an example from Bishop Heber who composed a famous hymn in which he wrote

'The heathen in his blindness/Bows down to wood and stone' (Smart 1973a, 20). Heber was a missionary writing from the standpoint of evangelical Christianity. But as Smart points out the 'heathens' in question, Hindus, do not identify *Vishnu* with a carved lump of stone. Furthermore, '[S]ince worship is an intentional act, having an intentional object, its correct description requires proper description of that object' (Smart 1973a, 21). Consequently such *descriptive reductionism* fails to provide an accurate account of the subject's experience.

Explanatory reductionism on the other hand offers an, 'explanation of an experience that are not those of the subject and that might not meet with his [sic] approval' (Proudfoot 1985, 197). It was noted in chapter five that Proudfoot claims that this is perfectly justifiable and is normal procedure and common is a subject like history.

In religious education it could be said that there has existed a second order explanatory framework of the kind typically derived from Smart's typology (See Smart 1973b, 45-48). Indeed the type of concepts listed in the Hampshire Agreed Syllabus *Living Difference* (2004) and the Westhill Project (Read et al. 1992, 27) referred to as concepts derived from the study of religion such as myth, ritual and symbolism may well be helpful as a mechanism or tool to enable pupils to develop a broad understanding of the phenomenon of religion. However seeking to interpret religion in such a way has sometimes led to a reduction in the descriptive power, and distortion, of the aspect of religion in question. Learning about and from ritual, ethics, myth *per se* is not the same as learning about and from *particular examples* of ritual, ethics or myth. If we merely learn about Hindu *puja* as an example of a class of ritual we are not necessarily learning *about* Hinduism nor are we necessarily learning *from* it. Furthermore by merely looking at *puja* as a form of ritual we could be accused of superficiality and of domesticating the religious tradition. We could be accused of *descriptive reductionism* (see for example Wintersgill, 1995). This has possibly been an area of confusion for teachers because learning about myth, ritual and symbolism *per se* does not, arguably, enable learning about and from to be used in a way that best

enables each term to illuminate our understanding and evaluation of the other. This can most effectively be achieved by selecting appropriate content from the religions themselves. So is there another second order explanatory framework that better respects the descriptive power of religious content?

8.8 Why second order frameworks can be helpful.

Despite criticisms of the way Smart's framework has often been utilised, second order frameworks for religion can be useful, especially if such a framework interprets religions in the context of what, for the adherents, their religion teaches about what it means to be human. If we can identify this then we can make some appropriate links between human experience and how we might deepen and broaden our pupils' understanding when they learn about the various religions. I suggest there are benefits from making use of Hick's second order explanatory framework that interprets religions as providing an analysis of human nature, which is always imperfect, and the role that religion plays in transforming human nature from self to 'reality' centeredness based on an understanding of transcendence as understood in the various traditions.

8.9 Religious education and human experiences of the transcendent

What is distinctive about religions, according to Hick, is belief in transcendence (See for example, Hick, 1989: 5-9). As Otto (1936, 144-145) pointed out, without transcendence or, as he put it, the holy at its core, 'no religion would be worthy of the name' (Otto, 1958). Eliade referring to the sacred, which has interesting implications for the debate about religious education, wrote that:

> A religious phenomenon will only be recognised as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of

physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it-the element of the sacred (Eliade 1958: xi).

I suggest, therefore, that the central focus for religious educators should be on religions as expressions of human experiences of transcendence. It should be stressed, taking Wright's concern about not limiting RE to an exploration of social space, that this does not mean that religious education merely focuses on the human experience. It is what human beings claim to know through their experience of the transcendent that is essential.

However, if this is to be achieved in a multi religious context then it would seem sensible for teachers to have some kind of framework in which to understand religions as expressions of human responses to transcendence in a global, rather than faith specific, sense, and in a way that moves beyond mere appreciation of cultural differences.

8.10   The soteriological character of religions

Here we can turn to Hick's Irenaean intuition and his claim that what is distinctive about post axial religions in general is that these human responses to the transcendent are soteriological in character. Religions are thus concerned, 'with the transformation of the self through an appropriate response to that which is most truly real' (Ward 1987: 153):

> The great post-axial traditions…exhibit in their different ways a soteriological structure which identifies the misery, unreality, triviality and perversity of ordinary human life, affirms an ultimate unity of reality and value in which or in relation to which a limitlessly better quality of existence is possible, and shows the way to realise that radically better possibility (Hick 1989 : 36).

It should be noted that Hick is not saying that *all* religions are soteriologically orientated. Indeed what Hick calls pre-axial religions were 'concerned with the preservation of cosmic and social order' rather than salvation/liberation (Hick 1989, 22). What follows in this section is a brief summary based on key concepts from the six 'major' post-axial religious traditions drawing on Hick's idea of a 'soteriological structure' (1989 : 36-55) and other sources , which illustrate understandings about human nature and its transformation. Obviously this has to be selective and there is always the danger of oversimplification but the intention here is to provide a general illustration of the nature of soteriology in the various traditions to emphasise those aspects of religion, namely transcendence and soteriology, that I am arguing should lie at the heart of religious education. Jackson (1997) has shown how diverse religious traditions and identities can be. However, as he pointed out in the case of Hinduism, although it does not have, 'a universally accepted core, Hinduism does have a family of distinctive concepts and social structures' (Jackson and Killingley, 1988, 23). What I am suggesting below, therefore, is that although religious traditions are varied and complex it is possible to identify certain clusters of distinctive concepts that encompass the religion's soteriological dimension.

Human transformation may be understood in two dimensions. Firstly, all the 'major' religions conceive of human nature and experience as being essentially unsatisfactory. Indeed this is the meaning of the Buddhist term *dukkha*. Because humans are subject to *tanha* (craving) life is never satisfactory. We crave for that which we do not possess which leads to a constant experience of life as less than satisfactory. This human experience is caused by our spiritual blindness or *avidya*. This spiritual blindness is the first link in the chain of causes of human suffering, referred to as the doctrine of dependent origination:

> Humans suffer as a result of a mental process operating within their very being. At the root of this mental process is their ignorance (*avidya*), which is why ignorance is set down as the first link in the chain of causes (Fernando, 1985, 33).

Avidya is a key concept that underpins other indigenous religious traditions of India such as Hinduism and Sikhism. In Hinduism *avidya* leads to *maya* (illusion about that which is truly real) leading to attachment to the world of *samsara*. It 'is the root cause of our unhappiness, and the reason for our seeking liberation' (Klostermaier, 1998, 99).

For Sikhs *avidya* and *maya* cause the condition known as *haumai* which means ego or I- centredness. A person who is subject to *haumai* is known as *manmukh*:

> Under the compulsion of *haumai* man comes and goes, is born and dies, gives and takes, earns and loses, speaks truths and lies, smears himself with evil and washes himself of it (AG 466).

According to Guru Nanak it is *haumai* which controls unregenerate man to such an extent that it 'binds him more firmly to the wheel of transmigration' (McLeod 1968, 182).

In the Semitic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam this unsatisfactoriness is understood largely in moral terms. In human nature there is a tendency to 'fall away' from God. In Christianity it is through *falleness* caused by the sin of the first human beings in the Garden of Eden. This causes human beings to live a life alienated from God.

> It was through one man that sin entered the world, and through sin death, and thus death pervaded the whole human race (Romans 5, 12).

In Judaism, whilst there is no conception of 'original sin' human beings are created with free will, with its constant tension between our evil inclination, *yetzer ha-ra*, and good inclination, *yetzer ha-tov.* As Maimonides said:

> Man has been given free will: if he wishes to turn toward the good way and to be righteous, the power is in his own hands; if he wishes to turn

the evil way and to be wicked; the power is likewise in his own hands (Montagu 1990, 19).

In Islam, although human beings are created with the capacity to understand and live by the absolute qualities of God, such as mercy, compassion and love, our earthly existence with its need for survival often causes us to be weak and fallible. Hence the tendency to be subject to 'forgetfulness of God' or *ghafala*:

> Human nature has thus engrained in it the awareness of truth, beauty, love and charity, mercy, justice and all other basic qualities of God…..and as human nature (*fitrah*) has been endowed with this awareness, the 'fall' (*habut*) could not change this real nature' (Ashraf 1988 , 31).

However the religious traditions provide for human beings a vision and a path of a limitlessly better life conceived in quite radically different ways in which human beings may achieve liberation from, and transformation of, a self centred and unsatisfactory existence. Hick refers to this as cosmic optimism (Hick 1989, 56-69).
Religions provide a means by which humans may become liberated from such unsatisfactory dimensions of the human condition.

For the Buddhist this consists of understanding the four noble truths, following the eightfold path and five precepts in a path of meditation and 'skilful living', developing the qualities of *metta* (loving kindness) and *karuna* (compassion) leading to the state of *nibbana*.

> I am liberated, monks, from all ties earthly and non-earthly. You are also liberated from all ties earthly and non-earthly. Go now and wander for the welfare and the happiness of the many (VP/MV, chap. 1, 19).

For Hindus, 'spirituality and daily life are practically inseparable' (Das 2002, 43). There are a variety of spiritual paths, or yogas; *bhakti* yoga (devotion),

jnana yoga (spiritual insight and knowledge), *raja* yoga (meditation) and *karma* yoga (selfless service). These paths are not necessarily tightly compartmentalised but in their various ways lead the devotee to spiritual liberation (*moksha*).

For the Sikh following a path of *nam simran* (keeping God constantly in mind) and *sewa* (selfless service) and hence developing *gurmukh* (God-centredness) leads to a state of *mukhti*.

> Salvation is achieved through self-realisation by the process of meditation on the Nam (name), which is a subjective or mystical experience, assisted by the Guru. This process destroys *Hauma*i (egotism)…..The grace of the personal Guru, as well as the invisible God-Guru, is the prerequisite for achieving salvation, on the basis of service rendered to the Guru (*Guru Sewa*) (Rahi 1999, 83).

For Jews the *halakhah* (Jewish religious law) provides the link between human beings
and God. Mystical Judaism contains the idea of *tikkun olam,* whereby creation caused disunity in the world and 'divine sparks were scattered throughout the entire universe' (Montagu 1990, 26). Thus humanity's task is to repair the world and for the Jew that means bringing *kedusha* (God's holiness) into the world through the development of right relationships with fellow human beings and with God:

> Our ethical standards must always be higher than the standards of those not subject to Torah, higher than those of secular society. Halakhah rests on ethics and is designed to elevate the Jews to the highest moral plane. Under girding Halakhah and springing from the covenant itself, from the idea of holiness, enshrined in Aggadah, ethical teachings, the spirit of ethics gives it strength (Trepp 1980, xii).

The Christian understanding of salvation is that although the human condition is a distortion of its true nature, God is at work in the world bringing individuals

and indeed the whole of creation to its true destiny. What is distinctively Christian about this view of human nature is that most Christians believe that the salvation of humankind has been achieved by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus humans can achieve redemption through faith in Jesus Christ and by the development of what St. Paul calls the 'fruits of the spirit':

> But the harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law dealing with such things as these. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the lower nature with its passions and desires (Galatians 5, 22-25).

Obedience to the will of Allah for a Muslim through religious practice based on the *shariah* and the inward spirituality of *tariqah* develops the virtues of an Islamic personality leading to paradise:

> According to Islam…the spiritual attainment of an individual implies an internal change in the individual manifested through external action. As without internal change external conformity to the law will be hypocrisy, the most important thing, according to Islam, is to follow the path that would lead to this change (Ashraf 1988, 38).

Hence Hick's theory is emphasising that what is common between the religions is that they provide the means for humans to transcend incompleteness and achieve spiritual liberation. However, there is no attempt to say that these various views about human nature and destiny are essentially the same. It should also be stressed at this point that I am not suggesting following Hick in saying that, as far as we know, the religions are equally salvific, although this is something that can be debated in the classroom. Each religion differs as to what is the human spiritual defect and in the spiritual path of transformation, and as to the goal to which this path eventually leads. Hence such objects and goals provide the means to differentiate between religious traditions (Clarke and Byrne 1993, 12-25). Nevertheless what they have in common, according to Hick, is this

soteriological function. Whilst different from each other they share similar patterns of interpretation of human nature and how it can be transformed. Thus I am arguing that any religious education worth its title should make sure that there is sufficient emphasis given to those dimensions which deal with these soteriological aspects, which I have argued lie at the heart of religion.

So, by developing such an interpretive framework the phenomena of religious belief and practice can be understood in a way that does justice to the transformative qualities of the religious traditions in a way that may enable students to widen and deepen their understanding of the human condition in a religiously ambiguous world. The question that, therefore, follows from this concerns how such a framework might be operationalised in the RE curriculum, RE resources and teachers' understanding.

Recent research on materials used to teach about world religions in schools provides evidence for the importance of taking my argument seriously. In a section that analyses whether current text books present religion in depth; in terms of its 'deeper significance' there are a number of comments to support a rethink about how religion is presented to students (DCSF 2010, 99-100). Just to quote one example from this section:

> Even where texts are encouraging a 'learning from' approach to religious education the reviewer found that pupils were not necessarily encouraged to delve much more deeply into the significance of the religion; '*"learning from ideas" tend to operate at the level of functionality-e.g. how they might show someone/something respect, the role of having a uniform etc'.* They do not explore Sikh ideas about human values and are interested in parallel practices rather than resonating with values in other traditions and pupils' lives.

8.11   Learning about and from religion as a pedagogical strategy

One way of beginning to think about how a Hickian explanatory framework
might be operationalised in RE is to consider the terms *learning about religion*
and *learning from religion* which have become widespread in religious
education syllabuses in England and Wales. For this reason I have chosen to
focus on the meaning of these terms and their potential for teaching and
learning in RE in such a way that such a process might be enriched by the
interpretation of religion that I am advocating. However, whilst these terms are
axiomatic when discussing the process of religious education, it is evident
from the academic literature on the subject that controversy remains as to the
terms' meaning and validity (See for example, Bates (2006); Baumfield
(2009); Hella and Wright (2009) and Wright (2004). Indeed Cooling (2000,
162) states that the relationship between learning about and learning from
religion is, perhaps, 'the most important question to have occupied religious
educators in recent years'. It is my contention that we can develop a shared
and clear understanding of these terms by applying Hick's religious
interpretation of religion to the context of teaching and learning in religious
education. The first task, however, is to explain how these terms began life as
a pedagogical strategy for the human development approach to RE (Grimmitt
1987) but then were uprooted from this context and became much more
problematic in terms of their meaning and validity as a teaching and learning
process.

8.12   Learning about religion and learning from religion: from clarity to confusion

Most religious educators are aware that the terms *learning about* and *from religion* were first introduced by Michael Grimmitt and Garth Read in 1975. The classic statement of the terms can be found in Grimmitt (1987: 225-6):

> When I speak about pupils **learning about religion** I am referring to what the pupils learn about the beliefs, teachings and practices of the great religious traditions of the world. I am also referring to what pupils learn about the nature and demands of ultimate questions, about the nature of a 'faith' response to ultimate questions, about the normative views of the human condition and what it means to be human as expressed in and through Traditional Belief Systems or Stances for Living of a naturalistic kind.

> When I speak about **learning from religion** I am referring to what pupils learn from their studies in religion about themselves-about discerning ultimate questions and 'signals of transcendence' in their own experience and considering how they might respond to them………….The process of learning from religion involves, I suggest, engaging two though different types of evaluation. Impersonal Evaluation involves being able to distinguish and make critical evaluations of truth claims, beliefs and practices of different religious traditions and of religion itself………. Personal evaluation begins as an attempt to confront and evaluate religious beliefs and values [and] becomes a process of self-evaluation.

Two points need to be made at the outset about Grimmitt and Read's conception of these terms.

Firstly some criticisms of *learning from religion* have, possibly, over emphasised Grimmitt's personal evaluation to the detriment of what he says about impersonal evaluation (see for example Bates 2006) and, although he doesn't mention Grimmitt particularly, Wright (2004). There has been a tendency then to criticise *learning from religion* as being just about the pupils' experience and devoid of any critical dimension. As can be seen from the quotation above though, there is nothing in Grimmitt's original conception of *learning from religion* that should inhibit students from examining the truth claims of religious traditions. Impersonal evaluation involves, 'being able to distinguish and make critical evaluations of truth claims, beliefs and practices of different religious traditions and of religion itself' (Grimmitt 1987: 225). (For a wider discussion of this point see Teece 2008).

Secondly, as already noted *learning about* and *learning from religion* were conceived within a human development approach to religious education, fully developed in one direction by Grimmitt (1987) and by Read, through the Westhill Project (1986), which, significantly, stressed that the study of religion should play an *instrumental* role in RE pedagogy.

One reason for a variety of understandings (and misunderstandings?) can be attributed to the fact that since Grimmitt introduced the terms the model has been uprooted from its original context and according to Grimmitt, 'some of its features [are] transplanted within a curriculum structure which, in other respects, reflects a rationale for RE which is alien to its intentions' (Grimmitt 2000, 37). This alien environment was the SCAA Model Syllabuses where the terms became learning about *religions* and learning from *religion*. Immediately it can be asked, is there a difference between learning about *religion* and learning about *religions*? And if one is learning about *religions*, what does it mean to learn from *religion*? These questions are not answered either in the SCAA models themselves or the QCA Non Statutory Guidance of 2000.

Instead the QCA (2000, 18) guidance provides a list of examples of 'good practice' in learning *from religion*. Whilst one example states that *learning from religion* is about the concepts of religion(s) most examples are about

processes and skills, or ways of teaching, which could be applied to any subject in the curriculum. These examples include being 'concerned with the active responses of pupils to what they are learning about'; 'valuing pupils' own ideas and concerns' and 'developing skills, e.g. the skill of living in a plural society'. A similar point has been made with regard to the *Non Statutory National Framework for Religious Education* (QCA 2004) by Kay (2005), even though when the terms appear in the National Framework they revert to learning about *religion* and learning from *religion*. However in the statement 'The Importance of Religious Education' it is written, 'Religious education encourages pupils to learn from different *religions* [my emphasis], beliefs, values and traditions while exploring their own beliefs and questions of meaning.' What are religious educators to make of this?

Finally in a recent editorial of the *British Journal of Religious Education* headed 'Learning about and from religious education', Vivienne Baumfield (2009) appeared to be exploring common themes within that particular edition of the journal that were explicitly realised in Hella and Wright's (2009) article on *learning from religion*. Did she mean to make a distinction between learning about and from *religion(s)* and learning about and from *religious education* or was it just a slip of the pen? It might be objected that I am being pedantic here, being concerned merely with semantics. I don't think so.

What might learning from *religious education* mean? Possibly the content free skills based examples listed above might be said to encompass what might be called *learning from religious education*. But did Baumfield really mean that? If one reads the editorial we find that she states that:

> We need to determine what is the object of study before we can devise appropriate means of learning and this is in part a question of intent but also a consequence of the extent to which concepts with which we are engaging have been defined within a recognised disciplinary framework (Baumfield 2009, 2).

Clarity about two statements embedded in this quotation seem to me to be of crucial importance to this discussion namely; 'what is the object of study' and 'the extent to which concepts with which we are engaging have been defined within a recognised disciplinary framework'.

With regard to the application of the terms in the classroom, there is evidence, largely from OfSTED reports (for example OfSTED 2005; 2007) that many teachers are not comfortable with this model; the major criticism being that learning *about* religion lacks depth and that consequently learning *from* religion is too 'narrowly conceived only as helping pupils to identify and reflect on aspects of their lives, with lessons used narrowly as a springboard for this reflection' (OfSTED 2005, 2).

8.13 Learning about religion and learning from religion: from confusion to clarity

8.13.1 Theoretical issues

There has been some discussion of the contours, possibilities and limitations of the model in the academic literature (see for example Grimmitt 2000, 34-38 and Hella and Wright, 2009) in terms of the teaching and learning processes involved or, in other words, *learning about religion* and *learning from religion* as a pedagogical strategy. But what I want to suggest is that this is all very well but it might not get us very far if we ignore a prior question well expressed by Grimmitt (2000, 15) when he wrote;

> the evaluative process of learning from religion(s) should be fully integrated into how, within a secular educational context, *pupils are learning about religions in the first place* [my emphasis].

I would like to add the word 'what' to Grimmitt's 'how', mainly because we have not as yet decided whether pupils should be learning about *religion*, *religions* or, indeed, *religious education*.

Moreover, Hella and Wright (2009) have identified the tension that inevitably arises between *learning about religion* and *learning from religion* when applied outside a 'confessional' context. This is because within a 'confessional' context pupils share a common worldview and 'the knowledge and insights gained from learning about their faith tradition will have a direct connection to their own personal beliefs and values' (Hella and Wright 2009, 56). (Although it should be noted that even in 'schools of a religious character' within the state system there are often pupils from different religious backgrounds with different beliefs). However, in a 'liberal' context pupils are required to engage with a plurality of views, some of which they might not see as immediately valuable or relevant to their personal development.

One could respond here by stating that Grimmitt was fully aware of this as can be seen from the examples he provides in *Religious Education and Human Development*. (Grimmitt 1987, 267-388). Remembering that religion is understood instrumentally by Grimmitt, the unifying factor in his rationale is the bringing into a synergetic relationship the life world of the pupil and religious life world of the various religious traditions. In Grimmitt's design the religious life world does not include *anything* that one might select from the phenomena of a particular tradition, but only that which illuminates and informs the pupils' life world curriculum (See Grimmitt, 1987: 226; 267-388). So religion illustrates questions to do with order, meaning and purpose in the universe, questions of truth, questions about human nature, questions about a just society, questions about individual self-fulfilment, ethical questions, questions about the nature of community, and questions about values. So it could be said that the unifying factor is human experience rather than religion.

Nevertheless Hella and Wright's point is an important one because it necessarily poses difficult questions about what we might mean by religion in such a context.

8.13.2 Practical issues

However, this is not merely a theoretical issue. As can be seen from the OfSTED reports many teachers are unsure how best to use this model. So rather than providing a theoretical analysis of these three possible interpretations, I will look at it with the aid of some examples. These examples are drawn from my experience as a PGCE external examiner observing lessons at key stage 3 and from other sources.

Example One:

Year 8 lesson: What is a ritual?

The stimulus for this lesson, and an example of a ritual, was Hindu *puja*. Pupils were asked to note down what they do on a regular basis. The idea of ritual was then explored and they were then introduced to a PowerPoint slide of a *puja* tray and the student teacher explained that *puja* was a ritual. Pupils then watched a short video showing Hindus doing *puja*. The aim of the lesson and the learning from element was for pupils to understand *puja* as an example of a ritual in religion and then reflect upon the manifestation of ritual generally and in some cases in their own lives.

Example Two:

Visiting Places of Worship

This example is taken from *Visiting Places of Worship* by Gateshill and Thompson (2000, 9). In this book suggestions are provided about how pupils may learn about and from religion during and following their visit: Suggestions for the way that pupils may learn from religion included asking them to think about a special place of their own; somewhere they go alone to think; a special building they have visited; a room or area at school that is special. A

final offering is that pupils could design a peaceful area at school with questions for the pupils about how, when and why it might be used.

Example Three:

Primary lesson: The Parable of the Lost Sheep.

This example is taken from OfSTED (2005). We are told that in a lesson on the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the focus of the lesson was on 'caring for others'.

Example Four:

Year 7 lesson: The story of Kisagotami

The lesson began with the student asking the pupils what they understood by loss. She then told the story. Then she asked the pupils to construct a 'memory line' of the key elements of the story. There were many enthusiastic answers including one girl who said that the key part for her was, 'that Kisagotami was adamant that her child wasn't dead'. Another girl answered that she thought the story told us that we all had to die and that the story helped her not to worry too much about dying. The student teacher then went on to develop the learning from element which was 'who and for what reasons do you go for guidance in your life?'

8.13.3 The misappropriation of Smart's framework

What are the pupils expected to learn about and from in these examples? In example one we could say that the teacher intended the pupils to learn about and from *religion* if religion is to be understood in terms of what I have referred to (above) as a second order explanatory framework provided by Smart's dimensions (Smart 1968). However as Smart points out 'the notion of *ritual* cannot be defined in an essentialist way.' Nevertheless, 'this leaves

open the possibility of seeing analogies between 'secular' rituals and religious ones' (Smart 1973a, 17). But in order to achieve this for his pupils, the trainee teacher would have needed to have explored with them in much greater detail the meaning of *puja* for the participants. This would require bringing out the structure and meaning of *puja* without comparing it to anything else. Smart uses an example of the Anglican Eucharist where he describes the method of 'bracketing'. He writes 'what we want to bring out in describing the Anglican Eucharist is the web of values and beliefs and feelings implicated in it for the participants' which 'might be obstructed by hasty comments on the truth or otherwise of the beliefs, the validity of the values, or the propriety of the feelings' (Smart 1973a, 20). By merely offering a brief description of the *puja* tray and a little of what happens the trainee teacher might have enabled the pupils to learn something superficial about *puja* but certainly nothing from it. Very significantly Smart states that 'there is the sense of the term *phenomenology* which refers to a descriptive method which need not be in any strong sense *typological* [my emphasis]' (Smart 1973a, 21). In other words adopting a phenomenological approach to teaching in RE does not necessitate a thematic approach to the subject matter.

8.13.4 Reducing religion to the experience of the learner

In the second example the overriding focus was the category 'places of worship' not a particular place of worship. So in asking pupils to think about a special place of their own or building they have visited there is no intention to learn anything from any particular religion. In the third example it wasn't ideas about God they were learning about or from, for example the idea of God as the good shepherd, but rather a version of religious education understood as a form of PSHE. And in the final example, the pupils were, potentially, learning something about Buddhism but the opportunity for them to learn from the teaching of Buddha was lost because the student teacher almost completely ignored the answers mentioned above because her attention was focused on achieving her learning from objective which involved trying to get the pupils to think about 'who you go to for guidance'. However, the two girls

did understand something of the teaching of Buddha about the inevitability of loss and death but their excellent answers were never developed and an opportunity for the whole class to learn from Buddhism was lost.

All of these examples fall prey to the mistake of reducing religion to the experience of the learner rather than religion enriching the experience of the learner. With regard to the former example each place of worship has its own particular gifts (Grimmitt, Grove, Hull & Tellam, 2006) to offer and those gifts are firmly embedded in the self - understanding of the tradition not in the experience of the learner.[13] What I mean by this might best be illustrated by the following example.

8.13.5 Reflecting the religiousness of religion

Firstly what is chosen from a religion for students to study should reflect accurately the *religiousness* of that tradition. In Hickian terms it means concentrating on what a tradition says about human nature and its transformation. This would involve students coming to understand certain key concepts. So to take Sikhism as an example, what is transformative in life is the overcoming of *haumai* (pride, self-centredness) by following a path of *nam simran* (the keeping of God constantly in mind) and *sewa* (selfless service) and developing *gurmukh* (God centredness) leading to the state of *mukhti* (liberation). Consequently the material which has the richest potential for pupils to *learn from* Sikhism in terms of this transformative dimension would be less likely to be found in raw information about the 'Five Ks' of Sikhism, but more in an exploration of *sewa*.

Let's imagine that a teacher takes a group to visit a *gurdwara*. During the visit the pupils will probably have experienced sitting in the prayer hall listening to the *Guru Granth Sahib* being read, sat together and served *langar*, they may

have been taken on a 'tour' of the *gurdwara* and listened to Sikhs talking about their beliefs and how serving in the *gurdwara* influences the way they live their lives.

In responding to these experiences the teacher might want the pupils to reflect on their thoughts and feelings during the visit. It is not unusual for a teacher to ask the pupils to undertake such activities as, talking about special places they like to visit, to consider the importance of worship to religious people and to consider the things that influence the way they live their own lives. The question that begs to be asked about such activities is how does the teacher intend these reflections to enable the pupils to learn *from* Sikhism? We can only answer this if we know what she intends the pupils to learn *about* Sikhism and it is difficult to see how this might be achieved unless specific Sikh beliefs and concepts are unpacked for them. Without such specific concentration on Sikh beliefs and practices the above activities are merely about the pupils' experiences and are not necessarily related to what they might learn from Sikhism. For example, in order really to learn from Sikhism, they will have experienced Sikhs doing *sewa* so pupils can reflect on ideas such as generosity, service, sharing and humility. From the experience of *langar* they might reflect on ideas of equality, willingness to give and receive, on caring for others. The experience of listening to the continuous reading of the *Guru Granth Sahib* (*akhand path*) might lead to reflecting on the importance or not of God's word being continuously heard and on what in their view are the most important sounds in the world. Reflecting on the importance of the *Guru Granth Sahib* for Sikhs they might reflect on ideas such as respect, guidance, authority and what a teacher means. (See appendix 2 for a list of examples from the six major religious traditions).

So the point I am making here is that in order for teachers to enable pupils to *really* learn from a religious tradition they need an explanatory/interpretive framework which reflects the *religiousness* of a tradition from which they can

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[13] Erricker (2010, 50-51) refers to *translating out* whereby there is a tendency to attempt to understand others in terms of our own 'cultural grammar' and *translating in* whereby one attempts to understand a concept in terms of the grammar in which it is embedded.

select appropriate beliefs, practices, and importantly, concepts. This thesis is an attempt to argue that Hick's explanatory framework can meet this need. There are of course other possible frameworks, such as Smartian dimensions (see page 193), but the point being made here is that Hick's framework offers greater opportunity than Smart's (for example) for teachers to teach about religion in a way that can communicate the *religiousness* of each tradition.

8.14   Learning from religion as skilful means: Religious education as upayic.

I now turn to another aspect of Hick's writing that can prove illuminating in the quest for clarity about *learning about religion* and *learning from religion*; his use of the Buddhist idea of *skilful means*.

So given the importance that religious education should reflect human responses to the transcendent and that students should *learn from religion*, it can be suggested that what is important for students is not knowledge of religion *per se,* as a reified 'traditional belief system,' but the way in which a Christian or Buddhist perceives the world. Smith (1981: 47-48) states that: 'To understand the faith of Buddhists, one must not look at something called 'Buddhism'. Rather, one must look at the world, so far as possible through Buddhist eyes.'

Hence the phenomena and teachings of religions are not just to be studied in, and for, their own sake but as means by which students may expand and deepen their understanding of the human condition in a religiously ambiguous world.

Thus the function that the religions play in the process of teaching and learning can be described as *upayic. Upaya*, or 'skilful means', was a concept used by the Buddha in two ways. Firstly religious teachers, such as Jesus or the Buddha, used metaphor, parable, etc to communicate spiritual truths to their followers. According to Hick (1993: 119-136) this is *upaya* in its narrower

sense. It is possible to conceive of the religious educator using *upaya* in this sense but with the concern that his or her approach may be bordering on the confessional. However, the use of the term *upaya* in a second, wider Mahayana, sense can best be described by the Buddha's famous parable of the raft, which can be found in the Majjhima Nikaya (Homer 1954). Briefly, a man comes to a river that has no bridge or means of crossing so he constructs a raft from reeds and branches. He then uses the raft to paddle to the other side. Because the raft has been useful he is tempted to take it with him on his journey. The Buddha counters against this suggesting the man leave the raft behind. The raft was a 'skilful means' by which the man could continue on his journey. In the Buddha's teaching the raft stands for the *dharma*.

It is in this second sense that religious education might be understood as *upayic*. I'm not suggesting that teachers present religions to students as *skilful means*. That would be to prioritise Buddhist understanding over any other. Rather the religions, understood as vehicles of human transformation, can operate within the teaching and learning process as *skilful means* by which the students develop a wider and deeper understanding of what it means to be human. There is no intention that students carry any particular religion with them on their journey, although they may of course already have a religion. If this is the case then learning about and from other religious traditions may enrich the tradition to which they already belong. For students of no religious adherence insights from the various religions may enrich their own particular stance on life, or even assist them in developing one. This is a two way process by which students might use what they learn about and from religion as a critical filter when considering the world in which they are growing up. It is two way because their experience of growing up in a western democracy will require them to explore religious teachings and practices critically on the basis of their own developing beliefs and values. The diagram on the page opposite explains how this may work in terms of a learning process.

Diagram 1: Learning from religion as skilful means (Stolberg and Teece 2008, 24).

make impersonal observations of how specific religious principles determine responses to particular human issues. So students can develop critical filters to illuminate and inform their personal perspective. To…

enable students to reflect on their emotional response to religious and human issues. Use this to form the basis of their view of the world around them. So that they can critically …

use their personal experiences to engage with specific religious and human issues, rather than examine the topic in the abstract or through someone else's perspective. So that they can then ….

Arthur (2005, 102) provides a fitting conclusion to this section on the potential of Hick's use of *upaya* to inform religious education when he writes:

> His [Hick's] utilisation of *upaya* suggests ways in which global diversity of thinking might be pictured in a manner that could accord value to many different outlooks without granting any one the credence that would mean others would automatically be dismissed as inaccurate or unimportant. The thinking behind skilful means allows us to approach a situation of pluralism in a creative, non-triumphalist mode. It offers a means of conceptualising diversity in a way that neither assumes singular correctness, nor allows us to rest content with any existing collection of metaphors. Rather, it encourages what I.T. Ramsey referred to as the 'multiplication of models without end' in an ongoing effort to grasp an elusive truth.

8.15   Conclusion

What I have tried to show in this chapter is that in order to answer the question as to how the study of religion might be understood to be a distinctive contribution to the curriculum clarity about the aims and purposes of RE is a necessary pre-requisite to the discussion. Having established that it is important to prioritise current understandings of the subject into a workable set of aims I then examined an aspect of the current debates about RE regarding the representation of religion and found that the recent emphasis on doctrinal 'truth claims' unnecessarily narrows the focus and potential of the subject. Finally I explored how insights from Hick's interpretation of religion can contribute to an understanding of how religious educators might view the role of the study of religion in RE and how such a view can contribute to the task of articulating the meaning of *learning about religion* and *learning from religion* as a pedagogical strategy.

9. Conclusion

This thesis began by establishing the need to look again at the self understanding of RE in terms of how the study of religion might best be understood in the context of the teaching and learning in the subject. I have presented an extended account and critical appreciation of the work of John Hick, arguing that religious educators can find much of value for their work in his religious interpretation of religion. When viewed as a second order explanatory framework Hick's interpretation can allow religious educators to understand religion as a distinctive way of understanding the human condition and can thus contribute towards RE fulfilling its aims. This study has concluded that;

a) The aims that RE has accumulated over the years need prioritising with the development of pupils' spiritual and moral development being the main aim. What that means, of course, requires further development and is not explicitly addressed in this thesis although the idea that pupils may be helped to construct their own 'ultimate environments' (see page 10) is worth exploring further.

b) The current focus in RE literature on 'truth claims' when interpreted essentially as 'doctrinal' claims unnecessarily narrows the focus of study and risks misinterpreting religion;

c) The current usage in RE syllabuses of the terms *learning about religion* and *learning from religion* often lacks clarity and coherence resulting in confusion and uncertainty amongst teachers;

d) *Learning about religion* and *learning from religion* need to be reclaimed and understood in the context of a human development model of RE that understands the teaching and learning process as skilful means;

e) John Hick's religious interpretation of religion as human responses to transcendence can provide a workable understanding of religion within this process.

9.1   Implications for current debates in RE:

Part of the reason for writing this thesis was a concern that since the publication of Andrew Wright's *Religious Education in the Secondary School: Prospects for Religious Literacy* (1993) an orthodox position has arisen in RE whereby earlier phenomenological approaches (or what Wright calls 'liberal RE') are deemed to be discredited and should be replaced by an emphasis 'towards the evaluation of the truth claims of the different religious traditions' (Strhan 2010, 27). This has led to several unfortunate consequences. Firstly according to Strhan (2010, 24), it has led to an orthodoxy whereby examination specifications and resources 'thematise religion as the object of a type of critical thinking whose truth or falsity can be described and known objectively through rational argumentation'. Secondly, and this is particularly true of Barnes' work, it has led to an orthodoxy that views religious traditions as being, merely, 'contradictory systems of belief' (Barnes 2009, 40). Thirdly it has led to an orthodoxy that understands all 'liberal' approaches to RE as being informed by theological Romanticism. Recently Wright (2007) has modified his position towards a more nuanced critique of 'liberal RE' but, arguably, the damage has already been done. For whilst the reintroduction of a critical theological dimension to current debates about the subject is a welcome development, such a debate needs to be more balanced. One of the contributions that I hope this thesis and my own published work (for example Teece 2005; 2008 and 2010) can make is to broaden the range of theological and philosophical perspectives available to religious educators. I mentioned on page 172 that religious educators must be careful not to impose an interpretation of religion that is essentially western and rationalistic on the way that religions are understood in RE. Strhan (2010, 38) tends to agree and suggests there is 'a need for further examination of the ways in which the understanding of 'religion' implied within the ideologies of religious education has emerged from distinctly Christian hegemonic understandings of religion and spirituality'. I would refine this statement in terms of the points I am

making here to read 'particular' Christian understandings. As Strhan (2010, 41) herself points out 'it is a trait of fundamentalism, both atheist and religious, to see religious truth as knowledge that can be argued for or justified'.

Another unfortunate consequence of the current orthodoxy is that it adopts either a sweepingly generalising position (for example, all 'modern' approaches to RE are distorted by an adherence to romantic, universalising liberal protestant theology) or it is ahistorical. For example when Wright discusses *learning from religion* (Wright 2004, 186-190; Hella & Wright 2009) he does so with no reference to the work of Michael Grimmitt who far from drawing from Romanticism adds the critical dimension of impersonal evaluation to this approach. Indeed such has been the dominance of the current orthodoxy in religious education literature that Robert Jackson's *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality* (2004) which is based on discourse found in contemporary editions of the *British Journal of Religious Education*, fails to make any reference to Grimmitt's influential human development approach that draws on the two major aspects of *Schools Council Working Paper 36*-namely the experiential and phenomenological approaches.

It is to be hoped, therefore, that this thesis can make a contribution to a more balanced debate about the nature and purpose of RE than has recently been the case.

Obviously a philosophical study such as this, whilst arguing a case and clarifying points has its limitations in terms of contributing to the development of teaching and learning in RE. Nevertheless this study raises several issues relating to both teaching and learning in RE and the need for further research in RE.

9.2   Implications for current practice and further research in religious education:

9.2.1 Teachers' understanding of religion in RE

One of the more positive outcomes of the 1988 Education Reform Act, as far as RE is concerned, was the emphasis it placed on the religious traditions in RE (Education Reform Act 1988, Section 8.3). As far back as 1996 two of the most important criteria for the Department for Education and Employment GEST 3 primary courses were, developing teachers' understanding 'of how religious education contributes to the moral and spiritual development of pupils' and enhancing teachers' 'subject knowledge, including...the religious traditions of Christianity and the teaching and practices of any principal religions represented in Great Britain which are specified for study at Key Stage 1 or 2' (DfEE, 1996). The question that arises from this is what kind of understanding of religions is necessary for teachers to be able to understand how the subject can contribute to the moral and spiritual development of pupils? Experience tells this researcher that simply being informed about Jewish festivals, or Buddhist artefacts, whilst interesting topics in themselves, does not necessarily satisfy teachers' basic insecurity about their perceived lack of subject competence. What the argument of this thesis suggests is that a possible reason for this is that merely presenting information about, or even experiencing, religious phenomena does not necessarily help teachers see its potential in terms of teaching and learning. Gates (2007, 2) is of the view that: 'Any superficial reduction of religion to its exterior manifestations that has occured in intervening years owes more to underqualified and overused teachers than to inherent limitations in conceptual intent.' Copley (2008, 205-206) is concerned that the widening of the requirements for entry on to a PGCE Secondary RE course has caused a dilution of subject background and there is a danger of 'a trend away from religion in the classroom towards philosophy, with which these teachers understandably feel more at ease'. Indeed: 'RE will not be helped by a flabby understanding of what its subject matter should be.'

As all teacher trainers know, what counts as appropriate subject knowledge for RE teachers is very much a live question. From my own course I know that trainees are recruited from many different academic backgrounds. Generally it is assumed that applicants with degrees in Theology or Religious Studies are 'safe bets'; applicants with other, related, Humanities degrees such as philosophy or sociology are often advised to do a 'booster' or 'bridging' course on world religions. Experience, however, points to the fact that even a student with a first class degree in Theology is not, necessarily, well equipped to teach modern day multi-faith RE.

Recently the Teacher Development Agency (TDA) has undertaken a project on subject knowledge for teaching. The presentation to the TDA from the RE advisory group suggested the following:[14]

1. That research is needed to ascertain what are the fundamental concepts that underpin the subject? This of course depends on what view of the subject is taken

2. At present compilers of agreed syllabuses tend to work with the National Non-Statutory Framework's list of 'concepts' which are beliefs teachings and sources; practices and ways of life; expressions of meaning; identity; belonging and diversity; meaning, truth and purpose; values and commitments. I have used inverted commas around the word concepts as it is no means clear that these *are* all concepts. Also this list suggests an explanatory framework that may not guarantee the kind of learning about the deeper significance of religion that this study calls for: it has echoes of Smart's six dimensional model.

Another way that the group suggested researchers may view this task was to present a different list of concepts namely;

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[14] Presentation to the TDA on November 18th 2009.

1. concepts derived from a particular religious tradition
2. concepts derived from the study of religion
3. concepts derived from common/shared human experience

This list echoes the approach to concepts found in the Hampshire Agreed Syllabus: *Living Difference* (2004) and, historically earlier than this, the *Westhill Project* (1992).

The group added that, obviously, knowledge and understanding of concepts from religious traditions is paramount but to teach effectively teachers would need to understand the relationship between these concepts and concepts derived from common/shared human experience.

It would seem that there is evidence to suggest that the development of teachers' subject knowledge is vital for effective teaching of RE. This thesis questions what that subject knowledge consists of and consequently raises questions about how it can be taught to and understood by teachers. It, therefore, raises a query about Gates' point (above) that poor teaching about religions is caused by under qualified teachers rather than limitations in conceptual intent. My suggestion is that it is probably both. Consequently this is a possible area for further research as is an investigation into what concepts can be derived from the religious traditions that can enable teachers and pupils to understand the essential *religiousness* or spirituality of each tradition.

9.2.2 Teachers' understanding of learning about and from religion

There is evidence from OfSTED (2005; 2007) referred to in this thesis that suggests teachers are currently uncomfortable with the attainment targets of learning about religion and learning from religion. A case has been made here that one reason for this is that since their original formulation the terms have been uprooted from their pedagogical context and become free floating terms

that have, perhaps, been applied to approaches to RE that are alien to the original intentions for them.

OfSTED suggests teachers don't appear to have a clear understand of the relationship between the two terms; often learning about religion(s) is understood as being about the content of religious traditions whilst learning from religion(s) is understood to be about pupils' experiences. It seems clear from the argument that I have presented in this thesis that teachers require a different understanding of the role that the transformative nature of religions can play in this pedagogical strategy; that any succesful *learning from religion* requires clarity about what is learnt *about* religion.

Copley (2008, 207) calls for more research on agreed syllabuses in RE. The association of RE Inspectors and Advisors (AREIAC) has recently held a conference on the future of the agreed syllabus (Brine, 2009). Further research might involve looking at how the two attainment targets of learning about religion and learning from religion are understood in these syllabuses, with the possible outcome being a debate about how they can best be understood or more radically whether the time has come to retire them gracefully and, for example, opt for just one attainment target as Hampshire (2004) have done.[15]

9.2.3 The availability of appropriate resource materials

This thesis calls for a framework that enables teachers to understand the *religious* significance of religion. Consequently it is important that RE resources enable them to do this. Evidence from the the Department for Children Schools and Families (2010) suggests that there is room for more work on this. Under the heading 'Depth v Superficiality' the report presents findings on text books with regard to 'the degree to which the materials engaged at more than a superficial level' (DCSF 2010, 99-100). Whilst there were resources that the reviewers believed successfully challenged learners,

they were less successful in presenting the: 'Deeper significance of religion.'

This was particularly evident in books about Sikhism but in many texts the 'focus was limited'. For example: 'The Buddha came across '*as nothing more than an original thinker*'(emphasis in original).' Some Christian texts did not strongly emphasise the 'transformational nature of religion'.

It would seem evident therefore that further research into how text books, and other resources, might better present 'the transformational nature' of each tradition would be beneficial.

9.2.4 What does it mean to promote pupils' religious understanding?

This thesis has pointed out that two recent 'official' documents (QCA 2004: OfSTED 2007) referred to the importance of developing pupils' *religious understanding* but without explaining what that might mean. Gates (2007, 85) puts the implications of this very clearly: 'What understanding of religion are children and young people capable of? Is understanding religion the same as religious understanding? If not how are they related? How does understanding develop?' Some recent research, although limited to pupils' understanding of Jesus, has made some important steps forward along these lines: See Walshe (2005); Walshe-Aylward (2008) and Freathy and Aylward (2010). Further research on similar lines that broadens the focus to religion or religions would be an exciting development.

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[15] The attainment target is: ' Interpreting religion in relation to human experience.'

Appendix 1: Interview with John Hick: 17.10.05

Q If we could begin with your professional life, I notice that Keith Ward had said that you scarcely like to admit nowadays to being a theologian.

A That's putting it rather strongly. The fact is that when people presuppose that I am primarily a theologian, I usually say that no, my professional field is philosophy of religion. But of course as an ordained minister of the United Reformed Church I've been through theological training and I have kept up to date so far as I can. But I have also written within the philosophy of religion because I am very interested in epistemology, the problem of evil, death and eternal life, the mind/brain issue and all sorts of other things. I've been concentrating during the last decade or so on the problems of religious diversity, and the conclusion that I have come to is one that reflects back into one's own faith. That faith requires revision at the point at which it claims unique superiority over all other faiths - and this is a bigger problem for some traditions than others. I think it's as great a problem for Christianity as any other, or even more than any other.

For if you take the central doctrine that Jesus of Nazareth was fully human but also fully God, or in its developed form that he was the second person in the divine trinity incarnate, and if you also assume – mistakenly, as I think - that Jesus was the founder of what today we call Christianity, it follows that Christianity is the only religion in the world to have been directly founded by God in person. God came down to earth, in the person of one member of the trinity, as Jesus of Nazareth, and founded the Christian religion.

So that led me to scrutinise that doctrine and what I found, following virtually all the major new testament scholars, is that the historical Jesus, so far as we can tell, did not claim to be God incarnate or Son of God in a unique sense.

We know that calling someone a son of God was a very, very familiar metaphor within the Judaism of Jesus' time. Adam was son of God, the angels were sons of God, Israel as a whole was God's son, and the ancient Hebrew kings were enthroned as son of God: 'thou art my son, this day I have begotten you'. In Jesus' time any pious and good Jew could be called the son of God. It's a metaphor meaning someone close to God, and sometimes someone with a special mission from God, as in the case of the king, and of course obviously in that sense Jesus was a son of God. Whether he was called that in his lifetime is far from clear. But it seems to me that what happened gradually in the course of several centuries, although it was well on the way by the end of the first century, is that a metaphorical son of God was metamorphosed into the metaphysical God the Son, second person of the divine trinity.

In my book the *Metaphor of God Incarnate* I argue that it is impossible to make sense of the idea of Jesus being wholly God and wholly man. That's the official doctrine of two natures, but quite a popular way of putting it today is in terms of two minds. I looked at all these carefully and I think one has to conclude, as so many theologians and nearly all preachers do, that the idea of divine incarnation is a mystery, to be believed – if it is believed - by faith as a divinely revealed mystery. But clearly it was not divinely revealed, unless you take it that the ecumenical councils, particularly Nicea and Chalcedon, were divinely guided, which is extremely dubious when you look at all the power politics involved.

Q So, these I suppose, many would call radical views, are the reason why some in the Christian community would regard you as a villain. The Protestant, Evangelical theologian Clark Pinnock even went so far as to say in print that you are a sad loss to God's Kingdom.

A Well I think you have to assume that if a responsible person like Pinnock says it in print, he does mean it. Once I was sitting opposite Wolfhart Pannenberg, the German theologian, who became increasingly conservative as he got older, at a concluding dinner at a conference in Germany. He

leaned over and in all seriousness said, 'I hope that on the day of judgement the Lord will remember your time as a minister', meaning that that was my only hope. So there are people who seriously do think along these lines. From what is normally regarded as the orthodox point of view, I suppose you would have to say that I am a heretic. I was even charged officially with heresy when I was teaching at Princeton Theological Seminary, which is a conservative institution. I was conservative myself in those days, but was charged with heresy, not for denying, but for not being willing to affirm the doctrine of the virgin birth. I had masses of warning mail saying things like 'you are one heartbeat from hell.'

Q   In terms of you coming to Birmingham, you've always said that it was new experiences that changed your views about things, not new thoughts.

A Yes, that's right. Quite quickly after coming to Birmingham I became involved in community and race relations and was chairing the religious and cultural panel of the community relations committee, and later the coordinating committee of the then new multi-faith Birmingham Agreed Syllabus, and also chairing AFFOR (All Faiths For One Race). In this latter there were people from several faiths – Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, and also Marxist. I had occasion to go often into churches, gurudwaras, Hindu temples, and mosques. It saw that all the externals are extremely different. For example in the Hindu temple in Handsworth, its sights, sounds, smells and colours is a reminder of - India where I have been. Again similarly in their own ways, in the other places of worship. And not only the externals in the physical sense but also the language, the rituals, but the concepts, the way that God or the ultimate is understood are different. These differences are fascinating and should never be concealed or underestimated.

But nevertheless underneath all that, or above or within all that, it seemed to me that essentially the same thing is going on in all of them - namely, human beings coming together under the auspices of some ancient, highly developed tradition which helps them to open their minds and spirits upwards to a higher reality which makes a claim on the living of their lives.

And in its essence that claim is the same within each of the traditions. So as a philosopher of religion I wanted to try to make intelligible sense of this situation, in which all around the world people are opening themselves to a transcendent reality of limitless value and importance to us, but in utterly different ways which are obviously connected to different cultures and different historical circumstances.

Q   This seems a good point to clear up two misconceptions that some have about your pluralist hypothesis. The first is that you are saying that there is a common religious experience. That's not correct is it?

A   No, that's not what I'm saying. There is a big philosophical debate about this. Are the reported more dramatic religious experiences such as visions, auditions, or the sense of union, identical across the traditions? I do not think they are. Phenomenologically they're manifestly different. Catholics may have visions of the Virgin Mary, Hindus may have visions of Krishna, and the reason is that in each case the imagery coming out of their own conscious and unconscious minds as formed by their traditions.   Of course, there's the special case of the experience of union. I've examined the unitive language by the great Christian mystics and it seems to me clear that in the vast majority of cases it is intended metaphorically. It is totally contrary to the Christian tradition to think that we literally become part of God, and a number of the major mystics say that this language refers to a moral union, a complete conformity to the will of God, not a literal, ontological unity. It's the same in Islam and in Jewish mysticism. Only in Advaitic Hinduism is it not said to be metaphorical. In Shankara's *Crest Jewel of Discrimination* there is a beautiful passage describing the experience of union – like a hailstone falling into a lake and dissolving to become simply part of the lake. But there is a problem here: in order to remember and report dissolving into the divine ocean and ceasing to exist as a separate conscious entity there has to have been a continuity of consciousness. So I think that here again, although it is not understood as metaphorical, if it is capable of being described, it must be.

Q   The other misconception of your hypothesis is that you start out with a prejudice that absolute views of religious truth are not tenable today.

A   My prejudices were originally the other way round. My Christian life began with a bang, a very powerful evangelical conversion when I was a Law student, and it took many years very gradually to detach myself from that. As I mentioned, when I was teaching at Princeton Seminary I was still a conservative Christian, except in this one respect of the virgin birth - or otherwise they wouldn't have appointed me. Princeton is a seminary in which a 19th Century a president boasted that new thoughts had never occurred in his seminary. It wasn't as bad as that in my time, and is better again today; but in the 1960s it was still very conservative. So I was gradually coming out of that and it was this experience in Birmingham that was my first genuine encounter with people of other faiths. I didn't start out with the feeling that the traditional formulae would not do, were not true to reality. This came out of experience, and then thought followed, trying to make sense of the experience.

Q   Your pluralist hypothesis is a philosophical explanation but would you call yourself a confessional pluralist. Would this be your religious view?

A   Religious pluralism is not a Confession in the sense of a creed or a sect. And remember that today religious pluralism doesn't mean just my own particular philosophical hypothesis. There's a whole range, with more people developing new forms of religious pluralism. Their practical outcome is the same but their philosophical understandings are different. There is a lot of internal discussion.

Q   In your autobiography, you mention that you think that in the future your hypothesis will become redundant

A   Well, in so far as there is any soundness in it, it will just be absorbed into the thinking of others and used in their own ways. I think that it is only a matter of time before what you might call the main Christian tradition comes to

accept that Christianity is not the one and only true faith and path of salvation. But by a matter of time I don't mean a short time. Goodness knows how long, but remember that change is much faster today than it's ever been before, so I don't think it will be as much as a century. However I also think that as a result of this it is quite likely that there will be a split in what is now called Christianity between the more evangelical fundamentalists (who are very, very numerous indeed and may then be numerically the main form of Christianity) and what we now regard as the mainstream. By the mainstream I mean, for example, most denominations represented in this country. Indeed in a way this has already happened, except still under the same umbrella name. If we think about much African Christianity, in Nigeria for example, that is a different Christianity, although the same central language is used. But on the ground it's a different Christianity from that of most of the Church of England, let us say, or the URC.

Q   You conclude your book *The Fifth Dimension* with the view that the metaphysical dogmas about which religions differ so strongly should be viewed as legitimate speculations but not absolutised as infallible. That what we need to know is how to live now. Does this reflect your interest in Buddhism?

A   Yes. I find a lot of wisdom in the Sutras, including for example the Buddha's parable of the man who is in a dangerous area. There's some water, a lake, and on the other side everything looks splendid, so he gets together some twigs and branches and makes a crude raft and paddles himself across. And then, because the raft has been so useful to him, he picks it up and carries it on his shoulder. The Buddha says he shouldn't do that, he should drop it; it's served its purpose. And, he said, It's the same with beliefs, the point being that they are human constructions, attempts to formulate what our experience means. A set of beliefs or a particular belief may be helpful to someone spiritually at a certain point in their life, but not later on. We probably have examples of that in our own lives, and can see it in others, and the same is true of whole communities.

If we go back to medieval times, before the 13th century or maybe even the 12^{th,} ordinary Christians thought of God as a terrible power to be dreaded. All the awful evils, the plagues and droughts and so on, were divine punishment, so clearly God was very angry with his people. Even Jesus was seen as the judge who would judge them on the last day. For mercy and consolation they didn't go to Jesus, they went to the Virgin Mary or very often the local saint who was revered in that village. So, you see that's a tremendous change. And we have to ask, Is it God who has changed over the centuries, or our mental images or concepts of God?

Yet whilst it is true that what we want to know is how to live now, always in the background is the issue of realism and anti-realism, raised today by Don Cupitt. You can of course be a humanist or an atheist or a Marxist and be just as concerned about how to live and live well. But that doesn't mean that there isn't a valid question – is there or is there not a transcendent reality? If one thinks about this, the alternative to transcendence is physicalism or materialism - the view that the entirety of reality is physical reality. And when you think of the implications of that, it conflicts with people's deepest instincts and insights, and it also invalidates most forms of religious experience as delusory. The issue is fundamental – which is why I've written about it a number of times.

Q   And it's something that needs to be emphasised about your work, that you are a realist, albeit a critical realist?

A   Yes, critical realist is exactly the right term. It means that there is a reality there, but we can only be aware of it in terms of our own conceptual resources. You know, it's amazing how many critics have read other critics rather than me, and this even applies to the present Pope, when he was Cardinal Ratzinger. He has been pinned down on that. (Documents reprinted in my *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*). If you put the name John Hick into a search engine like Google, you'll find a good many thousand entries. I've never taken the time to look through more than the first page or two, but a lot of them are critical articles. But when you criticise a thinker you must first

understand what he says in such a way that he can say, yes, that's what I mean. Some critics don't do that. They're setting up false targets designed to be knocked down.

Q   I wonder if one of the reasons for this is because you write with such clarity?

A   It's possible. I try to. And the more clearly you write the easier it is, and the more attractive it is, to criticise. It's a much easier job to criticise somebody whose meaning is clear than to criticise a great but obscure writer like Hegel or Heidegger, because you have to struggle to find out what they mean and very often it's inherently not very clear. But I would have hoped that my writing is clear enough for people not to misunderstand it. And of course there are plenty of highly responsible philosophers who fully understand what I say, and make very legitimate criticisms, from which I have often benefited.

Q Does Buddhism also influence, what we might call, your religious practice as well as your thinking?

Yes, in addition to the intellectual influence of Buddhism I practise a kind of Buddhist meditation, though of course as people like the Dalai Lama always emphasise, you don't have to be a Buddhist to benefit from this.

Q   So these influences from Buddhism don't detract from your original faith as a Christian?

A. No, that's right. People talk about the Christian faith, the Christian gospel, but the big question what exactly is the gospel? If it's the gospel of Jesus that's very different from the gospel of the church.
      The values of church life are partly as a supportive community and any decent congregation is compassionate when people are in need - this is extremely important. And in evangelical/Pentecostal services there is a huge

experience of togetherness generating great enthusiasm, whilst today the mainline churches are highly socially and politically oriented in a positive way. Also, of course, the Catholic high mass and the high Anglican services are wonderful aesthetic events, and even someone who doesn't believe a word that is said will find them aesthetically enhancing. So there's plenty of good in the churches, and I think they will always exist.

Q   It seems as though you speak for what we might call travellers not people with fixed positions? Often in RE the religious believer is presented as someone with a fixed position.

A   Exactly, that's a big error. To think that Christianity or any other faith has a fixed entity is a mistake.   None of them is fixed, they all have changed enormously through history, and individuals are usually not fixed either - though they may get stuck and so be fixed for a while or for the rest of their lives. Furthermore, although we all know the attendances at churches have been dwindling, I'm quite sure that there is outside the churches an enormous spiritual hunger, a real interest in basic religious questions, which however simply won't fit into the mental boxes which the churches still offer. So they're put off by the churches, and only if the churches reform their own ways of thinking will they ever attract people back again beyond a special core. We may now have possibly have reached down to that core with the churches remaining on a plateau which will not include the vast majority of the population.

Q   You may be a villain to some but for many RE teachers you are a hero. Who are your heroes?

A   Philosophically Immanuel Kant. Theologically, perhaps John Oman, who is very little read today and ought to be read more. His influence came to me through H. H. Farmer, teaching theology at Westminster College, Cambridge, where I had my ministerial training. But there are lots of contemporary writers who I think very highly of. For example, among Anglicans Keith Ward at Oxford and his successor as Regius, Marylin Adams,

and John Macquarrie; among Catholics Paul Knitter, Len Swidler, Roger Haight SJ, among Muslims, Abdolkarim Soroush, the leading reform thinker in Iran – where I visited in February 2005.   My difference from those of them who are religious pluralists is that their lives are lived very much within the ecclesiastical framework and they want their work to be acceptable within the churches. The result, to my mind, is that the message gets diluted. They have to be deliberately ambiguous. The only difference between us is that I don't have to be ambiguous.

But I think that pluralist thinking within Christianity is extremely widespread. I think that very many ordinary church members are implicit pluralists. That is, in their actual dealings with their other-faith neighbours and fellow citizens they don't for a moment think that they ought to be converting them, or that people of other faiths are spiritually inferior. They treat them as spiritual and religious and human equals, which implies when you think it out some form of religious pluralism. But it's when you spell this out theologically that it comes as a shock. It could, in a sense, be better if none of us did spell it out but some of us just can't help it!

Q Listening to you it seems that you have a courageous side to your nature, which might seem to sit uneasily with your gentle, rather English manner.

A   I don't think I've required any courage really. The only dangerous opponents I've had were back in the AFFOR days when I received threats from the National Front. But 'you are one heartbeat from hell' is not a death threat; it's a theological statement. If the Princeton case in the synod of New Jersey had gone against me I would have lost my job, but then I could easily have got another one. I didn't feel that this was the end of the world. In fact I thought it was totally ridiculous that this was happening in the middle of the twentieth century rather than the nineteenth. So, no, I don't think I'm courageous at all. I'm just following reason, logic, consistency and clarity.

Appendix 2: Learning about and from religions through visiting places of worship

Learning about and from Sikhism and a visit to a gurdwara:
hospitality/sharing/respect/gifts/learning and sharing music
/humility/holiness/generosity/beauty/unity/commitment/honesty/devotion/impor
tance of identifying that which is important/ God's words are to be found in
many places/listening to the praise of God is a good thing/reciting God's
praise continually is a good thing
Specific concepts from Sikhism, for example; sewa, akhand path, langar,
wahiguru, diwan, Guru Granth Sahib.

Learning about and from Islam and a visit to a mosque:
Unity/commitment/devotion/humility/brotherhood/respect for
Allah/submission/obedience/importance of cleanliness inside and
out/importance of prayer together/gratitude/authority/modesty/beauty in
pattern, colour and shape/taking care to make something beautiful for
Allah/importance of not making images/importance of memorisation of
important words/ holiness/ honesty/authority/importance of ritual
Specific concepts from Islam, for example; dhikr, ibadah, Qur'an, ummah,
tawhid, wudu.

Learning about and from Buddhism and a visit to a vihara:
Commitment/respect/devotion/all life changes and decays/obedience/value of
silence/meditation/difficulty of silence/struggle with oneself and one's mind/
honesty/ gratitude/ importance of ritual
Specific concepts from Buddhism, for example; anapanasati, annica, Brahma
Viharas, dukkha, samadhi, samatha, upaya, upekkha.

Learning about and from Hinduism and a visit to a mandir:
God can be understood in many different ways/God is bigger than the human mind can comprehend/the senses can be used in worship /gratitude/vibrancy and joy in worship /devotion/ holiness /generosity/importance of ritual
Specific concepts from Hinduism, for example; atman, avatara, bhakti, Brahman, dharma, trimurti.

Learning about and from Judaism and a visit to a synagogue:
Respect/ holiness /importance of the words of God/authority/obedience/importance of ritual/community/importance of prayer together/remembering the acts of God/remembering those who have died/ importance of symbol to communicate that too holy for words/everlasting presence of God/commitment/ gratitude
Specific concepts from Judaism, for example; kedusha, ner tamid, bet tefillah.

Learning about and from Christianity and a visit to a church:
Holiness /importance of symbol for communicating ideas/importance of sacrifice/ remembering the acts of God /authority/commitment/duty/confession/importance of ritual/forgiveness/repentance/beauty/expressing ideas about God in a creative form/ devotion/gratitude/ importance of prayer together
Specific concepts from Christianity, for example; communion of saints, reconciliation, forgiveness, prayer, thanksgiving.

From Maybury, J., and Teece, G (2005, 187-188)

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Abbreviations.

AG   **The Adi Granth**

VP/MV   **Vinaya Pitaka** cited through **Mahavagga of the Vinaya Pitaka** Followed by reference to the page, chapter, section and verse in the Pali text.

Biblical quotations taken from the **New English Bible**.