

Revelation, Wisdom, and Learning from Religion: A response to D.G. Attfield

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D.G Attfield's article "Learning from Religion" in BJRE 18:2 raises a number of difficulties in the treatment of truth claims in Religious Education. He argues that these claims should limit the acceptable goals of non-confessional R.E. to teaching about religion and not cross a threshold of faith-commitment beyond which a child may learn from religion. His arguments rest on a questionable understanding of religions as entirely defined by their irreconcilable revelations, which actually condemns R.E. to an ineffectual relativism. Attfield also makes contradictory assumptions about the capacity of children to make valid autonomous decisions to enter into faith-commitment. I shall argue that the coherence of non-confessional R.E. requires a wisdom-based understanding of religious development, coupled with an understanding of educational development which emphasises the importance of individual role-models and the gradual building of coherent world-views.

INTRODUCTION

D. G. Attfield's article 'Learning from Religion' roughly coincides in time of publication with the well-publicised speech of Dr. Nicholas Tate, the chief executive of SCAA, against relativism in education. In this speech he suggested that moral education was ineffective because teachers were taking an over-relativistic stance in order to avoid offending any particular group.

By relativism I mean the view that morality is largely a matter of taste or opinion, that there is no such thing as moral error and that there is no point in searching for the truth about moral matters....This view is widespreadTrainee teachers are deeply reluctant to do anything which might suggest that they are imposing ethnocentric, class, or gender values on their pupils, as if the truth of a value were always relative to its subject and never universal. (Tate 1996)

Tate went on to link the rise of relativism with 'the decline of religious faith' and went on to argue that

Although religious education is not the only vehicle, or indeed the main vehicle, for religious education in schools, its role is crucial....Religious education in maintained schools is not about persuading young people of the truth of theological claims. But it is (among other things) about teaching them the nature of these claims. (ibid.)

Hence Tate, like Attfield, shows a belief in the value of teaching about religion in the hope that children will learn values through the process of assessing theological claims for themselves. The intellectual

examination of religious certainties is taken by both to be part of the cure for relativism, even if these certainties are rejected in the process.

Here I intend to put forward the alternative view that in fact the premature intellectual examination of religious certainties is a contributory cause of the disease of relativism. D.G. Attfeld, unlike Tate, does face some of the limitations of only teaching about religion in his argument that non-confessional R.E. should not be attempting to bring about significant moral or spiritual progress, because such learning demands the acceptance of the theological assumptions of a particular faith-tradition (Attfeld 1996, p.83). He rejects what he describes as a smorgasbord approach to R.E., in which children select their own values from what different religions offer, as syncretistic and ignoring the crucial role of faith communities in nurturing coherent individual values (ibid. p.82-3). Hence, for Attfeld, it is not really the role of R.E. to overcome the 'dragon of relativism' (Tate 1996). However, I shall argue that Attfeld's approach perpetuates the isolation of religious communities from the understanding and sympathy of children, and creates the relativism which Tate justly criticises. Tate, on the other hand, shows insufficient understanding of how teaching about religion can create relativism.

The link between R.E. and relativism is based on the link between the assumption that religions are primarily based on revelations, and the relativist impasse produced by their irreconcilability.

REVELATION AND RELATIVISM

By 'revelation' here I am referring to the basis of a particular type of truth-claim made in theistic religions, where a doctrine is justified as absolutely true because it has been revealed by God. It may have been revealed in a certain form of words or propositions (as in the dictation of the Qu'ran), or through the actions of a religious leader, or through an intuitive experience of some kind, in the last two cases being later transferred into the verbal form of a doctrine. Whatever the origin of a revelation, and however sophisticated the theological understanding of its transmission, a theistic religious community is often defined by its shared adherence to the truth of such doctrines. When the acceptance of a particular revelation becomes normative of a particular faith-community, it is likely to lead to all expressions of whatever that community finds of religious value being in the form of cognitive doctrinal statements. Revelation, in other words, tends to lead to religion being primarily defined by propositions of religious belief which are to be either accepted, doubted or denied by others, whether or not the original revelation arrived in a propositional form.

It is this particular revelatory understanding of religion which Attfeld takes as entirely normative of religion in general and therefore normative of Religious Education. This is of course implicit in the reduction of religions in common parlance to faiths or belief-systems. The result of this approach, however, is that they are seen as mutually exclusive. Truth-claims which are based on particular revelations are not subject to falsification of any kind, for any questioning of what they assert is likely to lead, not to greater subtlety of understanding, redefinition or cross-fertilisation, but rather to an undermining of the authority on which these truth-claims are based, and hence a crisis of

security. There is no possibility of agreement between different revelations (even if, in terms of their actual content, they appear to be in agreement in some respects) because they are each based on different authorities.

Attfield appeals to Wittgenstein in the justification of this approach:

According to Wittgenstein, if there is to be objective knowledge within a form of life, "if language is to be a form of communication, there must be agreement not only in definitions but also... in judgements." Prior to the individual's faith, there is therefore a logical requirement that there should be a community of believers who operate criteria by which theological positions are validated. (Attfield 1996, p.81)

Wittgenstein, however, was pointing out the extent to which the meaning and interpretation of language is subject to the particular 'language game' one happens to be playing. A consistent strain of religious thought refers to the possibility of an experience of truth beyond language and beyond the conceptual attempt to formulate absolute truth in language. If Religious Education is to be defined in its learning goals purely by this approach, it involves ignoring the great tradition of prayer, meditation, symbolic iconography and paradoxical non-conceptuality which is to be found in the world's religious traditions. It is a much more positive use of Wittgenstein to explore ways in which we can overcome the linguistic divisions he explains, rather than consigning ourselves to be trapped in them.

When transferred into any non-confessional form of education, this revelation-based approach is both relativist in its conception and perpetuates relativism. The very position of introducing a child to a range of different beliefs which are seen as equally valid or invalid is itself one which invites the child to accept certain beliefs (i.e. relativist ones). If the religions have only been introduced to the child in a cognitive manner so that they remain abstractions, by far the most likely reaction is one of dismissal of the value of all religion, and adoption of the pervasive relativism of which Tate warns us. There is no reason to assume that children possess sufficient autonomy to reason themselves into accepting one of many sets of theoretical cognitive beliefs presented to them, rather than the much stronger, affectively-supported belief in relativism which the teacher is presenting as a model through the way in which he or she presents the theoretical beliefs.

The link between revelation and relativism is perhaps most clearly expressed by the Buddha's parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant. Each of the blind men touched a different part of the elephant, and, on the basis of their separate experiences, assumed that the elephant was a particular sort of object (a fly-whisk, a fan etc). They then could not agree as to the true nature of the elephant. The problem in this parable is not so much the fact that the men were limited by their blindness as that they took their limited information as authoritative. An R.E. based purely on a revelatory view of religion appears to wish to condemn our children to such a limited and misleading approach.

WISDOM AND EDUCATION

The alternative to the revelation-based approach to religion is a wisdom-based approach. By 'wisdom' I mean the gradual accretion of spiritual and moral knowledge which is not merely cognitive but affective. People who have acquired some wisdom have an understanding of some of the underlying processes which make sense of their experience, have developed values which they practise autonomously, and are psychologically and emotionally literate. All of these virtues could be equally described as those which education aims to cultivate, so it is not surprising that it is the aspects of religion which are concerned with wisdom which tend to be most stressed in Religious Education, particularly in the experientialist movement.

It is this aspect which can be 'learned from' religion, and clearly merely 'learning about' religion is unlikely to provide the affective element required for the genuine development of such wisdom in children. This concept of 'learning wisdom' covers three different types of learning in Attfield's analysis. He distinguishes 'learning how', 'learning to be' and 'learning mental powers', all of which he dismisses as unacceptable in R.E. for different but related reasons (Attfield 1996, p. 80-81).

The learning of specifically religious skills such as prayer or meditation ('learning how') is dismissed because 'it will be wrong to expect any actual use of these skills unless she is or becomes a member of the relevant faith community'. The assumption that cognitive beliefs must precede affective practices would be instantly seen as nonsensical in any other educational context, for what teacher of children completely divides the theory of a subject from its practice? In science it is accepted that children need to participate in scientific method by performing experiments before they are expected to believe the results, and a purely theoretical approach would be condemned by inspectors as bad educational practice. Why, then, should such bad practice be tolerated in R.E.?

The learning of virtues ('learning to be') is rejected, firstly on the odd ground that the educator does not have complete control over what is learnt, and secondly because 'some religious virtues are controversial' and the pupil should first have made an assessment of the truth-claims on which the desirability of the virtues rests. But these two reasons are themselves contradictory: either children do have sufficient autonomy and judgement to make a valid assessment of the truth-claims they meet with, in which case educators clearly cannot have complete control over what virtues they choose to learn, and it was never desirable that they should, or they don't, in which case there is no point in teaching the child about such truth-claims at all, since the declared aim of aiding the child to make an autonomous choice between them is impossible to fulfil.

Thirdly, the learning of mental powers such as imagination, sympathy or awareness is dismissed on the grounds that the nature and content of such powers is uncertain and their desirability is not uncontroversial. Attfield draws a parallel with English Literature here, where similar powers may clearly be developed. For some reason, however, he does not draw the logical conclusion from this parallel, that nothing which might be controversial should be taught in an affective manner in English Literature either. It may well be that such powers are uncertain in an

absolute sense, but most teachers would affirm that the effects of imagination, sympathy and awareness are overwhelmingly positive in any classroom. Uncertainty alone (which, if one follows sceptical philosophy, is all-pervasive) is not in fact an argument for refraining from doing anything, unless we wish to be paralysed with fear in a world of uncertainties. Instead, an experimental approach needs to be taken. In its basic philosophy, education is concerned with instilling confidence in the possibility of individual progress, and Religious Education needs to be founded on such confidence rather than on a state of fear arising from dwelling too much on cognitive uncertainty .

Although Attfield's reasons for rejecting all aspects of 'learning from' can be disputed on educational grounds, he does provide a useful analysis of exactly what education in wisdom might contain: skills, virtues and mental powers. His objections perhaps also provide us with an understanding of some of the underlying reasons why R.E. often fails to be successful: an over-abstract approach and a fear of the unknown and uncontrolled. This fear is scarcely surprising, since the teaching of skills, virtues and mental powers requires personal example and this naturally requires teachers to confront their own moral or spiritual inadequacies. However, it is better to acknowledge the difficulties here than to pretend that somehow any kind of Religious Education can take place without them being faced. What this really shows is that R.E. teachers need spiritual as well as academic and pedagogic training.

The general case for a wisdom rather than revelation-based approach to R.E. should now be clear. Nevertheless, a positive case still needs to be made on two points of difficulty: firstly, how a wisdom-based approach can avoid relativism without becoming confessional; and secondly, how revelation and truth-claims can be handled without allowing them to set the agenda in R.E.

WISDOM WITHOUT RELATIVISM

The case outlined so far may well be doubted by those who assume that this talk of 'wisdom' is simply another form of revelation in disguise. Whatever one attempts to teach as wisdom, it may be argued, will simply be based on different, and perhaps more fallible, cognitive assumptions than those of the revelations in the world's religions. In any case, it may be said, if this view of the goals of R.E. differs from the accepted relativism of non-confessional R.E., surely it can only be a regression to a different form of confessionality? The answer is that wisdom-based R.E. must steer a middle course between the Scylla of relativism and the Charybdis of confessionality. Although this is a difficult course, it must be explained how wisdom clearly differs from each of these.

Firstly, the methods of wisdom differ from those of relativism. It must be recognised that all methods of education imply a view, that this view will not be universally shared by all possible commentators, and that children educated in a given method are likely to be influenced by the view behind it. It is the myth of viewlessness which does most to support and spread relativism and is most likely to be absorbed by children. Teachers cannot be neutral and colourless, otherwise it is this very colourlessness which children are likely to take as typical of religion. They must accept the role of a spiritual and moral model together with the fact that any model cannot be ideologically pure but is subject to human failings.

Perhaps the best precedent for a relationship between teacher and child where wisdom is taught is that of master and disciple - a tradition which exists to some extent in all the major religions. Clearly teachers cannot have as close a relationship with pupils in an R.E. class as they can in a more explicitly dedicated religious context, but the same elements of personal example, personal challenge, differentiation between different pupils and affective as well as cognitive instruction should be present. The tradition of discipleship recognises the distinctly personal way in which moral and spiritual values are in fact formed, an insight supported by educational research into the way in which children acquire values (Fontana 1981). This personal element is as necessary in consideration of the child as of the teacher, since the child does not enter the classroom as a tabula rasa but as a human being who has already formed beliefs and attitudes. This element of discipleship is also recognised by the experiential movement in R.E., which stresses the ways in which children need to be helped to explore their own experience in relation to religious traditions (Hammond et al. 1990).

Secondly, the methods of teaching based on wisdom differ from those of confessionalism. An R.E. which sets out to instruct children into certain sets of beliefs is radically different from one where the teacher offers a personalised training in moral and spiritual methods. Epistemologically speaking, this distinction is that between a Cartesian Foundationalism, where the investigator attempts to find points of certainty from which to deduce reliable beliefs about the rest of his or her experience, and a Coherentist approach, where it is recognised that we start with prior beliefs and subject our experiences to scrutiny to see whether in fact our understanding is consistent.¹ The philosopher Neurath used the image of a ship to illustrate this distinction: if parts of a boat are faulty, one could take it into dry-dock for a complete refit (Foundationalist approach) or repair it piecemeal whilst still afloat, relying on the rest of the boat to maintain buoyancy (Coherentism) (Neurath 1932). Confessional R.E. is naive if it believes that instruction in one particular set of cognitive beliefs will actually lead children to completely abandon beliefs already formed under the influence of parents, peers and media, to take themselves back into dry-dock when they have just set out on an exciting voyage. With the aid of skilful teaching and materials, however, they can examine particular aspects of their experience, gain deeper understanding of underlying processes, reflect on longer-term goals and perhaps modify particular beliefs to ones which are more coherent with others that they hold and useful to them in the long-term.

The educational methods and goals outlined here are not relativist in that they do not assume the absence of ultimate values or the equivalence in value of all beliefs. Rather, they assume that there is a unified spiritual path on which both pupils and teachers have made varying amounts of progress, and that the teachers, generally speaking, have made more progress than the pupils. Neither teachers nor pupils have gained ultimate knowledge of cognitive beliefs which can be treated as certain, so in the knowledge of this uncertainty it would be quite inappropriate to present beliefs in any such light in the classroom. On the other hand, the teacher has gained skills and insights which will be of benefit to the pupil in making progress on the path, and it is quite appropriate for the teacher to introduce such religious skills and insights positively to the pupil. Clearly, if the pupil does not respond positively and autonomously, nothing further can be learnt, but the autonomy called for

here is only that required to investigate and try out a new approach, not that required to completely change one's cognitive beliefs.

EDUCATION WITHOUT REVELATION

The final difficulty to be discussed is that of how the revelatory content of religion can be the subject of a religious education which is not based on the kind of Foundationalist epistemology assumed by such revelations. This is the point where, in my view, some difficult truths have to be faced about the coherence of non-confessional R.E. as it is frequently taught at present. For it is clear that, even if the overall rationale behind non-confessional R.E. becomes a wisdom-based one, this approach is likely to be continually undermined if the syllabus studied is one which places a continual emphasis on the revelatory aspects of religion. Because of their nature, there are logically only three ways of treating such truth-claims: they can be accepted, treated relativistically, or rejected. Partial acceptance or rejection is not an option because of the way in which revelation is based on divine authority and stands or falls with such authority.

It is interesting here that Attfield regards the rejection of religious truth-claims, or even lack of conclusion about them, as equally a successful outcome of R.E.

When a negative point of view is held with regard to the belief-system of a faith, that position itself can be assessed in terms of faith-development, just as a positive position is placed in a staged progression....From the perspective of faith as an existential option, such a result will be classed as negative; however, as we have seen, it can be regarded as spiritual progress to a high level of faith (or unfaith) development. (Attfield 1996, p.83)

It seems astonishing to me that any educational practitioner could regard the wholesale rejection of what is taught as a successful outcome. Would an English teacher regard an ex-pupil who never read a book again as exemplifying the success of her efforts? However, this does show the contradictions produced when revelation meets education: the all-or-nothing situation produced when a pupil is expected only to accept or reject completely. Both of these must be regarded as completely unsatisfactory from an educational point of view. Acceptance will probably mean that the pupil has prematurely taken on board cognitive views when he or she does not yet have sufficient autonomy to do so in full knowledge of the implications. Furthermore, it will be a sign that the teacher has departed from his or her non-confessional brief. Rejection, on the other hand, will probably not just mean suspension of credence for particular cognitive beliefs, but a retreat into other, less coherent beliefs which are less challenging: consumerism, relativism and even nihilism may be included in these. The gates of the garden of religion, with its groves of growing moral and spiritual awareness, will be closed.

The third choice, that of failing to reach a conclusion, is equally unsatisfactory because this is an essentially relativist position implying that the possibility of value has been rejected. It is a de facto rejection and carries the same disadvantages, without even the redeeming feature of some critical judgement having been exercised.

Hence I conclude that none of the possible outcomes when revelatory truth-claims are introduced into R.E. is a satisfactory one on either educational or religious grounds. The relativist route has frequently been taken, not on the grounds of it being a satisfactory one, but as a sort of shoddy compromise between different interests. Different faith groups represented on SACREs, as well as overall government guidelines, have assumed that an essential element in the teaching of R.E. must consist in the teaching of the cognitive beliefs which they assume to be essential to religion of all types.²

This central assumption must be challenged on the grounds that many religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Daoism, Confucianism, Shinto and many animist religions) do not see religion primarily in terms of revelatory truth-claims, despite the attempts of some Western commentators to fit them into this straitjacket.³ This approach to religion is one which is much more typical of the theistic religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism), but even these religions also contain some groups and traditions which do not see spiritual and moral progress as entirely dependent on acceptance of revelation (one could mention the mystical tradition in Christianity, the Quakers, the Sufis, the Kaballah). Furthermore, a wisdom-based approach to religion is supported by many modern developments (eg. New Age groups, the popularity of meditation and Yoga, Humanism, Creation Spirituality, the Sea of Faith Group etc.).

This is not, of course, to deny that for many millions of people, revelatory truth-claims are the primary expression of religion. However, I hope I have already shown how such claims are incompatible with educational aims. The numbers of people holding such views should not be a reason for concluding that they are appropriate in R.E., any more than that the numbers of people playing the National Lottery show that we should instruct children in school as to how to play it. It also implies no disrespect to those believing revelatory truth-claims to argue that any education in these claims should take place outside the setting of compulsory R.E. in state schools, any more than the law relating to driving implies disrespect to drivers by asserting that children are not ready to take the wheel on a public road.

For these reasons, I must conclude that for R.E. to be a coherent subject its syllabus should not in fact include any presentation of the truth-claims of religion. Rather, it should explore spiritual and moral issues by drawing on relevant material from religious traditions. This might be seen as an extension of the 'thematic' approach to R.E. syllabus construction, except that at no point should the religious material considered be presented as a comparison of distinct beliefs about the theme being explored. Rather, the only beliefs discussed should be those found in an immediate and affective context (i.e. those of the pupil and of the teacher). The overarching rationale should be the development of the child's spiritual and moral skills, virtues, powers and awareness: that is, to enable the child to develop along a spiritual path. It should be stressed here that there is an important distinction between Religious Education (the compulsory subject for all children) and Religious Studies (the academic study of religion). Clearly there is a place for the presentation and discussion of truth-claims when pupils have reached a certain stage of critical autonomy and are interested in the theoretical investigation of such issues, when this would not be appropriate with

younger pupils. Religious Studies, however, is, wisely, not usually taught before Year 10, when it is made available as a GCSE option.

This conclusion raises a number of other issues which I do not have space to discuss here: my aim primarily is to stimulate further discussion. One point which certainly requires further discussion is the exact nature of the distinction between R.E. and R.S. and its justification. Another point which needs further exploration is the role of philosophy and psychology in giving coherence to the R.E. syllabus. However, these discussions must be left to a different context.

NOTES

- 1 For a detailed discussion of these terms see Jonathan Dancy, Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology (Blackwell 1985), p.53-140
- 2 Almost any syllabus document could illustrate this point, but for example see the Handbook for Agreed Syllabus Conferences, SACREs and Schools (Religious Education Council, 1989) particularly the example syllabus on p. 18-19.
- 3 For a Buddhist view of the experiential, non-revelatory nature of truth see Sangharakshita, The Three Jewels (Windhorse Pubns. 1977) p.52-6

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