

# Understanding 'religious understanding' in Religious Education

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## Abstract

This paper takes as its starting point, one of the explicit aims of Religious Education (RE) in England, namely, the development of students' *religious understanding*. It shows how curriculum documentation, whilst stating that *religious understanding* is an aim of RE fails to clearly outline what is meant by it. This paper draws upon longstanding and ongoing debates in the field and suggests that *religious understanding* may be best conceived as a spectrum of understanding. Approached in this way *religious understanding* becomes not an all or nothing affair, but a lens through which the student of religion may regard the beliefs and practices before them. Finally, the paper proposes an interpretation of *religious understanding*, which focuses on the soteriological dimension of religion, thus providing the student with a particularly *religious* lens through which to understand religious traditions in RE and concludes by outlining what such an approach might look like in practice.

KEY WORDS: religious understanding; religious education; soteriology;

## 1. Introduction

That education aims to develop understanding is uncontroversial (Smith and Siegel 2004). Yet what it means to understand, whilst a disarmingly simple question to ask, is one that is anything but simple to answer (Nickerson 1985 cited in Newton and Newton 1999,36). Furthermore, Newton points out that whilst understanding is seemingly 'valued almost anywhere teaching goes on', in practice, it 'is not the central concern of every classroom. In England and Wales there has been a

tendency to favour a reproduction of information' (Newton 2012, 9). Moreover, this lack of concern for understanding in the UK is also to be found in both the USA and Australia (Newton 2012). As Newton points out, 'if we want learners to understand we need to have some idea of what understanding means (Newton 2012). This is an essential point as if we do not know what counts as understanding in any one curriculum subject, how can we know when a student has achieved it?

Religious Education (RE) in England is a case in point. According to a recent inspection report, one of the key factors inhibiting students' progress is teachers' lack of understanding of the core purposes of the subject and what it is that students should be achieving in RE (Ofsted 2010). Knowing what it means to understand in RE therefore is paramount.

According to Newton and Newton (1999), what counts as understanding varies depending on the context. What it means to understand in history lessons, for instance, differs from what it means to understand in science lessons. If understanding is context specific, it follows that what counts as understanding in religious education must be distinctive to the RE classroom. If there is a form of understanding that is distinctive to RE, we need to consider what that form of understanding might be. The non-statutory National Framework for RE specifies that amongst other aims, RE seeks to promote students' *religious understanding* (QCA 2004, 9), yet it does not outline precisely what this might mean. Further reference to RE's contribution to the development of students' *religious understanding* can be found in inspection reports (for example Ofsted 2007) and the recent research report funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (Jackson et al 2010, 14). However, none of these documents clearly define *religious understanding* (Teece 2010) not do they identify what it might mean to have a *religious understanding* of the world.

The aim of RE to promote students' *religious understanding* has been the subject of much debate over the years. It is seen to be contentious because for some, to promote students' *religious understanding* is akin to promoting a personal faith (see

for example Marples 1978). This, it has been argued, is not the task of today's RE teacher (see for example Schools Council 1971). Yet, as indicated above, the development of students' *religious understanding* remains one of the stated aims of the RE curriculum.

This paper sets out to examine what might be meant by *religious understanding* in the context of the RE classroom and how the intention to promote students' *religious understanding* might be conceptualised in such a way as to ensure its compatibility with wider educational objectives. This paper draws upon longstanding and ongoing debates in the field and suggests that *religious understanding* may be best conceived as a spectrum of understanding. Approached in this way *religious understanding* becomes not an all or nothing affair (Astley 1994), but a lens through which the student of religion may regard the beliefs and practices before them. Finally, this paper proposes an interpretation of *religious understanding*, which focuses on the soteriological dimension of religion, thus providing the student with a particularly *religious* lens through which to understand religious traditions in RE and concludes by outlining what such an approach might look like in practice.

## **2. 'Religious' understanding**

What might be meant by *religious understanding* has been the subject of much debate in the field. One of the central difficulties surrounding the term is that it is unclear as to whether it assumes that understanding in RE is distinctive to RE; that is to say, whether there is a form of understanding that is *religious* or relates to religion that is somehow different to another form of understanding such as scientific, historical or sociological (Melchert 1981). Unlike similar documentation for other curriculum subjects however, the core curriculum document for RE in England (QCA 2004) does not present a case for the distinctiveness of the particular subject as a discipline that views the world from a particular perspective (Stolberg and Teece 2011, 34-36).

Much of the debate surrounding the term *religious understanding* has centered around the extent to which the content of RE, namely religion, might itself be considered a unique form of knowledge and whether, therefore, there is sufficient justification for the inclusion of RE in the school curriculum. If religion is a unique form of knowledge, then real understanding can only be the reserve of those on the inside, those who possess a religious faith. If understanding is not available to those outside of that faith, then RE, in the sense of contemporary multi faith RE, is 'impossible' as it is not possible to understand the phenomenon of religion from the point of view of the adherent while at the same time remaining free to reject those beliefs (Marples 1978). However, if religion is not a unique form of knowledge, in other words, if the skills required to know and understand religion are the same as those essential for any item of knowledge, then to promote students' *religious understanding* in RE must mean something other than to foster a personal faith position.

## **2.1 Religious understanding as believing**

For some, *religious understanding* presupposes religious belief, as to understand a religious concept is to accommodate it into one's conception of reality (e.g. Marples 1978; Gardner 1980). Such an interpretation implies that full understanding is possible only when one believes the claims being made. What it means to understand is complex as illustrated by the language we often use to describe it. When it is said that a person doesn't really understand, the point of the word 'really' is critical. It tells us that although the person may demonstrate one or more of the criteria often associated with understanding: a) connectedness; b) sense-making; c) application; and d) justification (see for instance Smith and Siegel 2004), there is something missing. Whilst he/she may be able to relate that which is to be understood to an impersonal body of knowledge and to that extent demonstrate understanding, this understanding is inferior to the real variety where the relating is to personal experience (Barrow and Woods 1988, 64). As the Schools Council Working Paper put it: 'It has long been assumed, by believers and non-believers alike, that emotional involvement leading to commitment is inseparable from a truly informed and sympathetic study of religion' (Schools Council 1971, 28).

If we apply this to *religious understanding*, then it follows that an 'insider' or participant understanding is not a desirable aim in a classroom that may contain students from various faiths or none at all (Marples 1978).

## **2.2 Religious understanding as theological understanding**

For others however, *religious understanding* does not presuppose religious faith, as religion is not a logically unique form of knowledge (see for example Hand 2006). Instead, *religious understanding* is to do with understanding the 'grammar' of religion. It is entirely possible from this perspective, to understand the claim that is being made (e.g. God is omnipotent), without believing it to be true (Attfield 1978).

On the other hand, some would argue that there are particular forms of theological understanding that require religious faith. For example, Hession and Kieran (2007, 19) state that, 'Catholic theology is about people and their experience and understanding of a loving God. It is deeply personal'. If what Hession and Kieran say is true then we are left with our original dilemma as outlined in the previous section.

## **2.3 Scholarly understanding of religion**

Some have distinguished between *religious understanding* and understanding of religion (see for example Cox 1983). Holley (1978) proposed that a scholarly understanding of religion, as opposed to a religious (spiritual) understanding, was better suited to the RE classroom, as it was essentially an intellectual understanding of religious phenomena and of *religious understanding* itself, rather than a distinctive form of understanding in its own right. *Religious understanding*, on the other hand, involves an emotive response and is available only to those with religious commitment (Cox 1983).

## 2.4 Religious understanding as a spectrum

According to Astley (1994), the key positions in this debate as outlined above have created an unhelpful polarisation and tended to treat *religious understanding* as an all or nothing affair. The problem with the idea that it is only possible to understand religion from the perspective of the insider is that it raises questions about whether religious education is a viable educational activity. If those on the outside cannot understand, and if we are true insiders only to our own experience (Kvernbekk 2001 cited in Bridges 2009, 112), what is the point of religious education? It cannot hope to achieve even its most fundamental aims.

In the same way, the difficulty with suggesting that an outsider can only hope to develop a cognitive, intellectual understanding of the phenomenon being studied, is that such an understanding cannot really hope to grasp why, for some people, God or the Transcendent, is the Ultimate Ground of their being; the axis upon which their whole world turns. A cold, rational, objective understanding could not begin to comprehend the reasonableness of such a position. However, the Schools Council Working Paper 36 is illuminating here when it suggests that, 'objective' understanding need not be-indeed is best not- seen as cold and rational. In referring to a phenomenological approach to the study of religion the paper suggests that understanding other people's beliefs depends on 'the characteristic human capacity for self-transcendence'. It goes on to say: 'A human being can be himself [sic] and at the same time share the life and thought of another person. A person does not react only to another person as an object' (Schools Council 1971, 22).

A more helpful approach might be that proposed by Grimmit (1987) who suggested that the distinction between an intellectual outsider's understanding of religion and an insider's *religious understanding* was really a distinction between two ends of a continuum of *religious understanding*. In this way, being conscious of religion and having religious consciousness are simply different points on that continuum (Astley 1994). There is no clear cut off between them and one may contain elements of the other. The difference is one of degree. Indeed, even an insider's understanding

might find itself on different points of that continuum depending upon the object of that understanding. It is entirely feasible that someone brought up in a faith tradition might adhere to some aspects of that tradition more than others, and in relation to some, might find his or herself more closely aligned to the point of the view of the outsider than to that of a fellow insider.

Thus *religious understanding* may be better conceived as a spectrum of understanding where the observer's understanding need not be inferior to that of the participant's as 'the taste is from the same cooking pot as the full meal' (Astley 1994, 93). Moreover, the observer's understanding may even be preferable at times, as the insider may be blinkered and trapped in his/her own set of self referencing assumptions (Bridges 2009). Conceived of in this way, the development of students' *religious understanding* becomes an acceptable aim for the state maintained English school RE classroom which may contain students from a variety of faith backgrounds and none. Both the insider and the outsider perspective are valued and both may be seen as evidence of a student's *religious understanding*.

For Grimmitt, the issue at stake is how education should relate to religion and what contribution the study of religion should make to students' understanding of themselves and the world around them (Grimmitt 1987, 43). As both education and religion are value-laden enterprises our understanding of how students should understand religion depends on recognising that in a secular educational context *education*, as opposed to religion, is the *first order activity*. This does not exclude the possibility of students being able to form some understanding of a religious tradition as understood by its adherents but any such understanding, 'will inevitably be influenced by the fact that the study is taking place within the context of a secular educational enterprise' (Grimmitt 1987, 46). Because of this educational context, RE shares a concern with other subjects, such as the arts, literature and human sciences, in exploring human values. However, what is distinctive about RE's role in this is that RE helps students explore such values, 'within the context of a religious view of life' (Grimmitt 1987, 132).

Of course Grimmitt's approach is based on his view that the central purpose of RE lies in its contribution to human development. So religion isn't studied for its *intrinsic* worth but rather for its *instrumental* worth. Indeed Grimmitt offers a humanistic rather than theological rationale for RE. However, whilst, in his view, theology cannot provide a *sufficient* understanding of RE it does make a *necessary* contribution 'in providing for the elucidation of *Substantive Religious Categories* which permit the differentiation of 'religious beliefs' and 'religious values' within human beliefs and values' (Grimmitt 1987, 260 emphasis in original). The possible contribution that theology may provide for RE is clearly expressed by Grimmitt (1987, 261) in the following quotation:

All religions provide a view of the human and a vision of the goal to which human beings should aspire. In this sense their disagreement is likely to be less with the concept [of humanisation] than with the implications of how human beings should respond to it. 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.

However, herein lies the essential dilemma for religious education. 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?

Furthermore what might such *religious understanding* look like in the context of the RE classroom? To answer this question we need to return to the *subject matter* of religious education as it is in the context of learning about and from religion(s) that the curricular documentation refers to the development of students' *religious understanding*. If the development of students' *religious understanding* refers to the development of students' *religious understanding* of religion and religions, the issue becomes not how does one develop students' *religious understanding* per se but how does one develop students' *religious understanding* of religion as opposed to any other form of understanding of religion such as historical, sociological, philosophical, etc? The key issue then becomes, what might be meant by a *religious understanding* of religion?

### **3. What might be meant by a 'religious' understanding of religion?**

In recent times an interesting attempt to articulate a distinctive *religious* interpretation of religion is that of John Hick (1989). Hick (2006) discusses the question 'What is Religion?' and develops the Wittgensteinian argument about family resemblance concepts which he first outlined in his *Interpretation of Religion* (1989). Religion 'has no common essence but links together a wide range of different phenomena.....The network can be stretched more widely or less widely' (Hick 2006, 63-64). In its widest usage, according to Hick, it can include Soviet Marxism, whilst in terms of a more 'compact' use religion 'requires some kind of belief in a transcendent supra-natural reality' (Hick 2006, 64). He then goes on to say that the wider and narrower uses are relevant to different interests so sociologists will be interested in flinging the net as wide as possible, whilst the 'great world faiths' will be interested in narrower usage focusing on the centrality of the transcendent. It is not the case that 'one usage is correct and the other wrong, but that they serve different legitimate purposes' (Hick 2006, 64). This is interesting for it suggests that any attempt to articulate what understanding religion is in the context of *religious* education, as opposed to some other curriculum subjects, is an emphasis on transcendence. Of course Hick

develops this fully in his *Interpretation of Religion* (1989) to refer to the relationship between belief in the reality of the transcendent and human transformation.

For Hick, religions are essentially soteriological, salvific. 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).

Teece (2010) has suggested that an emphasis on understanding religions as vehicles of human transformation in the context of transcendence is a way forward for teachers to develop a shared understanding of what it is to learn about religion. Central to this is how a teacher interprets learning *about* religion. As noted by Hick above, religion can be understood in a variety of ways depending on the disciplinary perspective from where one is standing. So, if we come to understand religion through a framework that interprets religions as human responses to the transcendent, the key to understanding, arguably, lies in what Grimmitt calls *Substantive Religious Categories*, from which are derived specific concepts of each religious tradition (see especially Grimmitt 1987, 233-256).

What we are suggesting therefore, is that the key to understanding a religion lies not just in those aspects of understanding listed below, which could be classified as a version of sociological understanding namely;

- a) understanding of the significance of religions and beliefs (QCA 2004,9)
- b) ability to discuss issues which matter to them (Ofsted 2007,7)
- c) ability to respect differences of opinion and belief (Ofsted 2007,7)
- d) understanding of the ways different faith communities relate to each other (QCA 2004,9),

but also, and crucially, an understanding of the meaning of religions and beliefs, which necessitates an understanding of key concepts that define /describe the religiousness of the religion in question. That is, an understanding that is not so much a soteriological understanding of religion which might be closer to an insider faith perspective, but an understanding of religions in their soteriological dimensions.

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 and enables 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 taking this 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 (Jackson et al 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 students 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 students' lives.

### **3.1 How might this look in practice?**

What follows is an attempt to articulate what a soteriological understanding of religion might look like in the context of the RE classroom; specifically, how pupils might be enabled to explore and learn from the soteriological dimension of Sikhism.

If we take Hick's model as a guide, soteriology is understood as human transformation in two dimensions. Firstly, all the 'major' religions conceive of human nature and experience as being essentially unsatisfactory. In terms of Sikhism *avidya* (spiritual blindness) is a key concept that underpins the indigenous religious traditions of India.

For Sikhs *avidya* and *maya* (illusion as to what is ultimately real) 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).

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 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* (spiritual liberation).

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 *Haumai* (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).

How might a visit to the *gurdwara* enable students to learn from this soteriological dimension of Sikhism?

During such a visit students would probably have the experience of sitting in the prayer hall listening to the *Guru Granth Sahib* being read after which they would sit together and be served *langar*. In addition, they may be taken on a 'tour' of the *gurdwara* and listen 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 students to reflect on their thoughts and feelings during the visit. It is not unusual for a teacher to ask the students 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 students to learn about and from Sikhism? We can only answer this if we know what he/she intends the students to understand 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 students' 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 students 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; on what in their view are the most important sounds in the world; or perhaps on the very idea that God's word can be heard in the world and what that might mean in their own lives. 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.

Thus the Sikh concepts and values involved in this example are reflective of Sikhism's soteriological dimension. Of course, students often learn about phenomena of Sikhism such as the Five Ks, which can go some way to developing students' understanding of an aspect of Sikh identity, but the material which has the richest potential for students to understand Sikhism in terms of this transformative dimension, is more likely to be found in an exploration of *sewa* because, as indicated above, it is an important aspect of *gurmukh* (God centeredness), which leads to spiritual liberation and is thus transformative.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper began by outlining the need to attend to the frequently ignored, often contentious, yet explicit aim of religious education to promote students' *religious understanding*. In this paper we have explored what might be meant by *religious understanding* in the context of the RE classroom in England. We have shown that at present there is a lack of clarity in RE curriculum documentation which fails to offer an understanding of religion that distinguishes *religious understanding* from understanding that might be characteristic of, say, sociological or historical

understanding. Finally, we have proposed that one way of addressing RE's responsibility to promote students' *religious understanding* in the RE classroom would be to develop students' understanding of a religion's soteriological dimension.

In many ways, the attempt that is being made in this paper to articulate a distinctly religious understanding of religion in RE is reflective of an ongoing struggle in the fields of Theology and Religious Studies to articulate an understanding of religion in its plurality of forms that is distinctive of religion rather than a naturalistic discipline such as Sociology (see for example Hick 1989 and Cantwell Smith 1981). Whilst this paper has drawn primarily from Hick's understanding of religion in its plurality as being essentially soteriological, it is important to note that Hick himself recognised the inadequacies of this term, being so inextricably bound to the Christian concept of salvation (Hick 1989). Nevertheless, despite such inadequacies, by developing students' understanding of the soteriological dimension of religious traditions, RE might avoid promoting the superficial understanding of religion that it is often accused of (see for example Ofsted 2007, 2010; Jackson et al 2010).

A soteriological understanding of religion has the potential to transcend a mere conceptual understanding of religion in that it can provide a framework within which key religious concepts might be understood. For instance, the concept of *sewa* is only fully understood when it goes beyond being about service to others and is seen in the context of a Sikh's spiritual development and transformation from self centeredness to God centeredness.

In terms of the spectrum of understanding referred to earlier, the implication of our argument is that it is worth pursuing an interpretation of religion in RE that may be closer to an insider's understanding but which does not itself necessarily lead to a faith position. A student of religion might therefore demonstrate an understanding of a *religious understanding* of religion from an insider perspective, an outsider perspective or from any point on that continuum.

In this paper we have proposed that religion should be understood soteriologically and that to do so reflects a distinctively religious understanding of religion. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine whether such an understanding of religion is the only way in which religion might be understood religiously. Neither do we mean to exclude other forms of understanding in the RE classroom. There are good arguments that students need to understand the political dimensions of religions in the world, for example, if they are to be fully educated about religion. But at a time when the nature and purpose of the subject is often the major focus of RE research (see Freathy 2007) it seems timely to explore the question of what might be distinctive about a *religious* understanding of religion in a timetabled subject called *religious* education.

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### **Abbreviation.**

AG    **The Adi Granth**