# Discovering Views of the Divine

## An Interreligious, Transcendence-Orientated Approach to Theological Content in Religious Education

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## Abstract

The development of students' theological understanding(s) in British multi-faith Religious Education (RE), specifically in schools without a religious affiliation, has been much debated (Astley and Francis, 1996; Cush, 1999; Copley, 2001, 2005; Reed et al., 2013; Chipperton et al., 2016; Freathy and Davis, 2019). Critical views on the use of theological approaches aimed at furthering such understanding(s) are often based on the assumption of a general incompatibility between the discipline of Theology – especially if interpreted in the sense of 'faith seeking understanding' – and certain values of non-confessional, multi-faith RE such as impartiality and tolerance of a plurality of perspectives (Smart, 1983; Netto, 1989; Brine, 2016a, 2016b). Herein, theology is generally described as presenting a risk of religious indoctrination (see Parsons 1994; Hull, 2004; Copley, 2005; Cooling, 2010). Yet, what has not been sufficiently explored is whether or not, and if so, on what argumentative grounds, this theory is tenable – by clarifying, for instance, what conditions theological approaches would have to fulfil to be adequate for schools without a religious affiliation.

Using the method of critical analysis of selected literature in a process of dialogic philosophical argumentation, this thesis seeks, first, to reveal that the (perceived) compatibility problem described above is unnecessary, only occurring if Theology and RE, and the relationship between them, are defined in mutually irreconcilable ways; and second, to propose an alternative theologically orientated approach to RE designed, specifically, for the study of multiple theistic religions in religiously unaffiliated schools. The thesis draws the following main conclusions: to ensure that approaches aimed at furthering theological understanding(s) are suitable for non-confessional, multi-faith RE, they must never presuppose faith in the divine on the part of the students (or teachers) and should be applicable to all monotheistic and polytheistic religions studied in RE, thereby offering opportunities for interreligious investigation. Moreover, in an attempt to propose an approach that meets these requirements in a way that maximises the distinctive contribution Theology can make to non-confessional RE, alongside other disciplines, the thesis promotes the view that, in this particular educational context, theology should be defined primarily, but not exclusively so, by its objects of study (rather than methods), that is the key concepts, beliefs and doctrines relating to the divine found in these traditions. And finally, this content-based and (potentially) interreligious view of theology should, in turn, be embedded in a broader hermeneutical framework within which theistic religions are explored through an interpretive lens that assumes the centrality of transcendence in religious belief, which – for theists – arguably manifests itself in an orientation towards the divine in their personal and communal lives. This is in order to balance philosophical focal points in the conceptualisation of religion(s), e.g. emphasising conceptual/doctrinal aspects, with a more life-centred view of theistic faith that defines being religious in this context as standing in a meaningful relationship with the divine.

Advantages of choosing this combined content-based/life-centred approach to furthering theological understanding(s) (e.g. as one element in a broader multi-methodological, interdisciplinary approach to RE) are that it enables students to explore the complexity of theistic belief, systematically and with the potential for careful interreligious comparison, which neither crosses the line to confessionalism, nor disregards the self-understandings and specificities of individual theistic traditions, revealed in their various ways of 'God-centredness'. This discussion is particularly important today because current literacy-focused propositions for RE (see Clarke and Woodhead, 2015; Dinham and Shaw, 2016; CoRE, 2018) pay little attention to the role theological understanding(s) may play in developing religious literacy as a broader aim of RE.

## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Karl Heitzmann and Ully Grösch without whom I could not have embarked on this academic journey, nor many other journeys in my life.

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# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| AE | American English |
| APA | American Psychological Association |
| APPG | All-Party Parliamentary Group |
| AQA | Assessment and Qualifications Alliance |
| BA | Bachelor of Arts |
| BE | British English |
| BHA | British Humanist Association |
| CORAB | Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life |
| CofE | The Church of England |
| CoRE | Commission on Religious Education |
| DCSF | Department of Children, Schools and Families |
| DES | Department for Education and Skills |
| DfE | Department for Education |
| EBSCO | Elton B. and Stephens Co. (data base) |
| ERA | 1988 Education Reform Act |
| GCSE | General Certificate of Secondary Education |
| HE | Higher Education |
| IMRAD | Introduction, Methods, Results, Analysis, Discussion |
| IRO | Individual Research Objectives |
| ITT | Initial Teacher Training |
| JSTOR | Journal Storage (data base) |
| LEA | Local Education Authority |
| MAT | Multi-Academy Trust |
| MFL | Modern Foreign Languages |
| MA | Master of Arts |
| NSS | National Secular Society |
| Ofsted | Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills |
| PBUH | Peace Be Upon Him |
| PGCE | Postgraduate Certificate of Education |
| PhD | Doctor of Philosophy |
| RCC | Roman Catholic Church |
| RE | Religious Education |
| REF | Research Excellence Framework |
| REC | Religious Education Council of England and Wales |
| RI | Religious Instruction |
| RS | Religious Studies |
| SACRE | Standing Advisory Councils for RE |
| SRM | Systematic Research Methods |
| STEM | Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics |
| WJEC | Welsh Joint Education Committee |
| QCA | Qualification and Curriculum Authority |

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Introducing the Topic: The Challenge of Promoting a God-Centred Approach to Multi-Faith Religious Education

The best way for me to explain the complex of problems with which my study is concerned is by looking at an example of one of the last extensive analyses of the state of British Education and Religious Education (RE), in particular, which gave special attention to what could be described, very broadly, as 'the question of the place of God in (Religious) Education': Terence Copley's *Indoctrination, Education and God: The Struggle for the Mind* (2005). I will start with a short presentation and critical analysis of Copley's core arguments, which will enable me to identify problems in his approach to this question and to point out a specific philosophical dilemma identifiable in the research literature of British Religious Education which, I believe, has not been sufficiently explored to this day. The following quotation provides insight into his way of thinking:

> 'Education is visibly preserving the discourse of religion, but sometimes rather like a fish that has been filleted. *God, the backbone of religion, has often been neatly excised from the presentation.* A spineless dead fish on a slab is too often the result (…) Even the popular post-16 philosophy-of-religion syllabus[1], in dealing with the traditional proofs of God's existence, ignores why some intelligent people believe now, centuries after these old proofs have been demolished.' (Copley, 2005, 148, my emphasis)

The reason why I have stressed (in this quote) the claim that God has been 'excised from the presentation' in education is that it is a useful summary of Copley's main conclusion that modern British educational practice is shaped by a 'secular indoctrination' that ignores institutional religion, does not take personal belief seriously and often denies the 'possibility of God' (Copley, 2005, 139). By treating religious belief merely as a private, optional affair, he argues, education fosters neither respect for nor an understanding of religious traditions as complex systems of beliefs, teachings and practices that make claims not just to personal, but also divine (absolute) truth. This secular indoctrination, so Copley argues, can also be found at the level of Religious Education in state-maintained schools. Specifically, he explains, the revolution in RE which took place in the 1970s and was characterised, most notably, by a pedagogical shift from confessional, (neo-)theological Christian Instruction to a more phenomenological, non-confessional world-religions approach, created a new form of Religious Education that 'was enthusiastically, occasionally fanatically, anti-confessional' and committed to the values of 'neutrality' and academic 'objectivity' (Copley, 2005, 113). Ever since then, Copley states, many RE professionals, portraying their subject as a key agent for multiculturalism by demonstrating clear opposition to religious confessionalism and indoctrination, have thus 'provided an alternative sub-text, namely that religious truth claims are controversial and divisive and should be avoided in classroom teaching' (Copley, 2005, 113).

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[1] This reference to the content of AS-/A-Level courses in Religious Studies may appear to be less relevant to today's situation as it concentrates on post-16 syllabuses from more than a decade ago. However, as discussed later in this thesis, a similar criticism relating to the different GCSE and A-Level examination specifications, used in secondary schools and further-education colleges up until 2016, was put forward by Strhan in 2010 who claimed that the school subject, Religious Education, suffers from an overemphasis on philosophical considerations such as arguments for and against the existence of God, which ignores the significance of the role that transcendence plays in the lived experience of believers (Strhan, 2010). Moreover, it is arguable, the same trend to focus strongly on the Philosophy of Religion in Key Stage 4 and 5 courses of Religious Studies persists to this day and is visible, for example, in current (that is, post-2016) AS-/A-Level specifications of examination boards such as: AQA (AQA, 2016) and WJEC Eduqas (WJEC Eduqas, 2016). (For more evidence, see Bowie & Coles, 2018.)

Copley names Michael Grimmitt's book, *What Can I Do in RE?* (from 1973), as an example of a pedagogical stance still influential at his time of writing, which reflects such a view of Religious Education. According to Grimmitt, RE teachers should see themselves as 'shopkeepers' putting wares in the window (e.g. different religious beliefs and worldviews), which their customers – students of RE – are free 'to examine, appreciate and even try on' without feeling obliged to make any purchase (Grimmitt, 1973, 26). Another problematic development leading to a lack of focus on God (according to Copley), can be found in the 'curriculum liaisons' that RE entered in the past decades 'to make itself look more relevant' in the face of secular education, such as its self-definition as a Humanities subject, referred to by some schools as 'Ethics' or 'Life Studies' (Copley, 2005, 115). The biggest problem he identifies here is that the field of Humanities, by definition, focuses on the human, rather than 'the question of God', even though religions necessarily 'deal with the possibility of God' (Copley, 2005, 115). In these ways (and many others), Copley concludes, RE has deprived itself of the chance to 'present the case for religious belief' in the public realm – a goal the subject could only fulfil if it adopted a 'world-religions-plus-spiritualities' approach that is both academic and 'takes God seriously' in that it allows students 'the freedom to discuss and question', whilst also remaining open to the confessional idea of 'nurturing children' in the heritage religion of British culture, Christianity (Copley, 2005, 113, 138-139).

As indicated above, even though many important criticisms[2] can be raised against Copley's rather bold assertions, I will focus my analysis on those aspects of his views which I see as illustrative of a particular philosophical dilemma, found in the research literature of RE, in which theology or any God-centred approach to the study of religion(s) arguably finds itself as soon as it addresses (or wishes to include) the context of non-confessional, multi-faith Religious Education. In the case of Copley's written contribution, the main issue to point out is the lack of precision and clear differentiation with which he uses the terms 'God', 'idea of God', 'question of God' and, most notably, 'possibility of God'. In the context of supposedly regrettable curriculum liaisons RE has made, Copley argues, for instance, that RE should not define itself as a Humanities subject because Humanities does not deal with the 'question of God'. This chosen terminology, however, is misleading. Is it not legitimate to claim that the *question* of God is very much a Humanities focus because Humanities subjects such as History, Philosophy, Psychology, etc. are by definition, concerned with *human questions*, including ultimate ones such as the question of whether or not God exists (see, for example, philosophical arguments for and against God's existence or psychological explorations of religious experience)? Dealing with 'God', by contrast, (as opposed to the 'idea', 'issue' or 'question' of God, etc.) could be classified as a theological question, concentrating more directly on that which Theology explores, namely *theos* (God) as such, but this does not mean that Theology itself should be located outside the Humanities spectrum – an assertion that would also contradict the departmental structures of many British universities[3]. The real problem for Copley, it seems, is therefore not that RE, identifying itself as a Humanities subject, does not deal with the 'question of God', but that it fails to concentrate – perhaps, in the way certain types of (confessional) Theology would do – on God *per se*.

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[2] A serious criticism worth mentioning here is, for example, that whilst making the strong claim that a process of secular indoctrination has occurred in British education, Copley fails to define the core concepts he uses to establish this thesis (indoctrination, secularisation) with any clarity. This is most evident if we look at those pages in his book (Copley, 2005) that deal with the meaning of indoctrination (pp. 3-7) because all we find there is a list of definitions and explanations, provided by other scholars such as Barrow and Woods; Snook; Wilson; Spiecker and Hull, which – instead of being discussed (let alone rejected or endorsed) are merely used by Copley to make the complaint that 'none of these commentators […] raises the question of whether *indoctrination by omission* is also possible' (Copley, 2005, 5, my emphasis). The problem is that it is not so clear what Copley means by this. 'Indoctrination by omission' might refer to the idea that indoctrination sometimes occurs not only through active attempts at teaching a chosen set of facts, beliefs and values, but also, more passively, through the neglect or ignorance of those areas in a potential curriculum that might undermine the desired learning outcomes. In the case of the secular indoctrination Copley criticises here, this could be interpreted as a way of educating people that deliberately ignores the significance of religion, spirituality and belief in God, in particular, in modern societies.

Yet, even with this clarification in mind, the idea remains vague and implausible. In this context, Stephen Burwood raises two objections against Copley's idea of indoctrination by omission (Burwood, 2006). First of all, Copley 'does little to establish the notion' (e.g. by providing a detailed explanation of what he means by the term), and second, he later contradicts himself by saying that 'to indoctrinate is to compel someone to embrace the certainty' of a belief or beliefs (Copley, 2005, 139), in the case of Copley's thesis, those of secularism, e.g. the idea central to secularization theory that, in modern Western societies, religion is but an optional, private affair (Burwood, 2006, 106). However, taking both components seriously (the definition of secular indoctrination as both indoctrination by omission and indoctrination by coercion), leads to questionable conclusions. Thus, Burwood suggests, we might wonder if the mere failure to investigate something in depth is tantamount to 'compelling someone to believe the certainty of its alternative' (as Copley's argument seems to imply), and even if this were tenable, might we not object then that *all* formal education – being necessarily selective in its curriculum choices – is inevitably also a matter of indoctrination by omission (Burwood, 2006, 106)? This, however, would contradict Copley's main argument as it relativizes his claim about the specific neglect of religious topics and issues in British education and belief in God, specifically.

The same lack of clarity is reflected in Copley's central notion of the 'possibility of God', which, due to its grammatical awkwardness, is even more difficult to interpret. Thus, we might ask: *what* is possible – *teaching about God* (or belief in God) in and through education or *God's existence* as such? From a purely grammatical viewpoint, the term 'God' in this phrase needs such a specification because, without it, it would most likely refer to a supreme being, with or without personal attributes, in which case the question to deal with would rather be 'Who is possible?', which makes even less sense than 'What is possible?' in this context. That Copley has God's *existence* in mind is evident from his assumption that training people to dismiss the claims of religion as irrational, thereby 'reducing God to an optional cerebral "idea"' (which some individuals happen to adopt), is 'akin to programming under-nourished people to recognise food as poison and therefore reject it' (Copley, 2005, 139). It is important to realise, though, that this goes much further than simply saying that God's existence is possible: claiming that God is not just an 'idea', but something which is necessary for human physical and intellectual survival – like food is to the human body – clearly implies both the *certainty* of God's existence and God's *significance* to human life, two claims education can hardly be expected to make in the context of liberal democratic, plural societies of the twenty-first century.

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[3] See, for example, University of Exeter: College of Humanities (University of Exeter, 2019b); University of Manchester: Faculty of Humanities (University of Manchester, 2019); University of Leeds: Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures (University of Leeds, 2019); University of Oxford: Humanities Division (University of Oxford, 2019); etc.

Moreover, if we focus our attention on Religious Education as a specific school subject rather than education as a whole, this assumption becomes even more problematic. On what grounds – we might ask, for instance – can it be established that RE teachers in schools without a religious affiliation have the authority to determine whether God's existence is possible, let alone certain? On what basis could they make such a claim? How could it ever be appropriate for teachers of non-confessional, multi-faith RE to deliver a form of Religious Education that takes the possibility of the actual existence of God, rather than people's ideas of God, seriously – the latter of which could be justified on the grounds that it can be evidentially proven that many people have theistic beliefs and that these beliefs should hence be taken seriously. The fact that this is not enough for Copley confirms what we have already seen above: the real problem relating to Religious Education is that the manner in which God should be taken seriously in RE, according to Copley, has a significant confessional aspect, namely by 'induct[ing] children into the heritage religion' of British culture that naturally takes God's existence for granted: Christianity (Copley, 2005, 138). This, however, although being acceptable to some degree, perhaps, in Christian faith-school settings, can hardly be viewed as an adequate approach to multi-faith RE in state-maintained schools that are not associated with any Christian denomination.

This realisation brings us closer to understanding why Copley's grammatically strange claim for the 'possibility of God' exemplifies a philosophical dilemma found in the literature of British Religious Education today. Arguments for a more God-centred type of RE are often proposed and (as this thesis will show) discussed in relevant literature without specification of the educational setting from which they emerge and/or which they address, such as RE in schools *with* or *without* a religious affiliation, thereby implying that such contextual differences are irrelevant to the strength of the given argument. It therefore happens that those who promote a stronger focus on God and theistic belief in Religious Education (e.g. by endorsing theological methods in RE and/or concentrating on theological curriculum content) often do so, to some extent at least, from the perspective of a religiously specific, usually Christian, confessional approach, which they may or may not portray as being applicable to religions other than Christianity[4]. It is arguable that this lack of differentiation in the research literature has contributed to an idea of Religious Education today in which learning about God tends to be associated with an insider's approach to the study of religion(s) in which God's existence is presupposed, or the possibility of it is taken very seriously, at least. Modern multi-faith RE, however, was in part born out of a rejection of Christian confessionalism and is therefore suspicious of anything that might bear the risk of religious indoctrination, whether Christian or from any other religious tradition. For this reason, the practice of studying belief in God, given its assumed confessional undertones, is often viewed today as an activity that is clearly unsuitable for secular educational settings such as religiously unaffiliated schools. This tendency to associate the study of theistic belief in schools with confessional intentions is evident, for example, in a statement made by Humanists UK in their recent campaign for a reform of Religious Education:

> 'our work in RE focuses on ensuring non-religious perspectives are included (e.g. atheism taught about clearly when beliefs about god are being taught, and Humanism taught about as a non-religious ethical approach to life) and opposing any confessional teaching in state schools, where pupils are instructed in a particular religion'. (Humanists UK, 2017)

That this statement assumes at least a potential causal link between the study of theistic beliefs and confessionalism can be seen in its syntactical construction. The sentence possesses two main objects denoting the two main aims that Humanists UK pursue in their appeal for a reform of Religious Education – an inclusion of non-religious worldviews, in particular atheism and humanism, and an opposition to confessional teaching. Following the rules of logical reasoning, it is a requirement (if internal self-contradiction is to be avoided within the statement) that these two aims are compatible with one another, if not mutually supportive. The impression created here, one might argue, is that the first aim (including non-religious worldviews in RE) contributes to the realisation of the second (countering confessionalism). This can also be seen in the way the insertion specifying the first object stresses the significance of contrasting theistic beliefs with atheist convictions in RE, presumably as a means to oppose confessional influences on the subject.

This way of thinking creates a dilemma for those who might wish to promote a more God-centred approach to the study of religions in schools because it implies that it is logically and practically impossible to endorse both at the same time: the importance of studying belief in God in RE as well as the values of non-confessional, multi-faith Religious Education. As a consequence, arguments such as those put forward by Copley are sometimes categorically dismissed, in which case partial truths, potentially contained in them, may also go unnoticed. Thus, it is arguable that concentrating too much on the above criticisms of Copley's argument (including linguistic correctness) could lead us to overlook the important observation (made, for example, by Cooling, 2010; Gearon, 2014; DCSF, 2010; Strhan, 2010) that in the study of the five major monotheistic and polytheistic religions covered in British Religious Education today – Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism – only little attention seems to be paid, momentarily, to understanding belief in God or any views/ideas of the divine. A growing body of research suggests, however, that this (apparent) development in Religious Education is very concerning as it has led to a questionable representation of theistic religions and theistic belief in the classroom (Conroy, 2016; Conroy et al., 2013; Cooling, 2010; DCSF, 2010; Ipgrave, 2009; Strhan, 2010; Teece, 2005, 2010c).

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[4] Examples of 'God-centred' approaches to RE rooted in Christianity, but claiming to be applicable to other religious traditions, are for example: Hull's thematic teaching approach (Hull, 1975d, 1975c); Cooling's process of concept-cracking (Cooling, 1994b); and Reed and Freathy's Narrative Theology (Freathy et al., 2014; Reed et al., 2013).

James Conroy's criticism, for instance, is that many RE teachers, due to a general 'fear of the transcendent' often combined with a lack of theological subject knowledge (which can be explained by the fact that an increasing number of RE specialists now come from degree backgrounds other than Theology or Religious Studies), tend to ignore the significance of studying the theological realm of religions, e.g. by concentrating primarily on ethical aspects of the content they teach (Conroy, 2016, 172-173; compare Strhan, 2010 and Gearon, 2014). This is even visible in the ways traditional theological subject matter is sometimes dealt with in the classroom today. For example, in the case of Christian Bible Studies, Rob Freathy, Esther Reed and Anna Davis argue that the missing focus on the question of God and God's dialogical relationship with humans has led to a serious misrepresentation of Christian beliefs about the Bible in the study of religions in schools (Freathy, Reed, & Davis, 2014; see also Pett & Cooling, 2018). Instead of gaining an understanding of Christian views of the holy scripture as a manifestation of God's Word in the world and hence, divine revelation throughout human history, students from non-Christian backgrounds often come to see the Bible merely as a set of fixed rules or principles whose main purpose it is 'to guide Christians in making correct moral decisions' (Freathy et al., 2014, 301). It goes without saying that the level of understanding of the Christian tradition gained by such students in Religious Education is rather limited. Hence, it is evident that Copley's appeal for a more God-centred approach to Religious Education could also be rephrased as an appeal for a *revivification of theology* as an important, but also necessary approach to the study of religion(s) in schools – important because theology concerns itself with (the study of) God, the 'backbone of [theistic] religion' which is too often 'excised from the presentation' in RE, to use Copley's words again (Copley, 2005, 148, my insertion); and necessary because, without any consideration of the theological dimension of religion(s), any attempts at representing theistic religions in the classroom would work with an incomplete picture of these traditions, thus diminishing students' chances for deep learning.

And this is exactly where my study and Copley's research overlap and differ at the same time: as we have seen, Copley's cure for the lack of God-centredness in multi-faith RE is a world-religions-plus-spiritualities approach which also has the confessional intention of nurturing children's spiritual development in the Christian tradition – justified on the grounds that Christianity is the heritage religion of British culture. Yet, in this vein, he runs into the philosophical problem that arguments for the need of a (more) God-centred Religious Education are difficult to reconcile with the values of multi-faith RE (academic objectivity, impartiality, tolerance of a plurality of perspectives, etc.; see Cush, 1999; Freathy and Davis, 2019; Jackson, 2017; Larkin et al., 2019; Moulin 2009, 2015; Pett, 2018b) *whenever the underlying educational motivation is rooted in confessional thinking of any kind.* (This, arguably, includes even those God-centred approaches that are religiously non-specific as in 'not rooted in a particular tradition', but which assume the certainty of God's existence.) What my study has in common with Copley's position is that it also responds to the realisation that belief in God or the divine, to use a more religiously inclusive term, is often a neglected focal point in the study of religions in religiously unaffiliated schools today – a development which I ascribe to what I would call 'the *(perceived) compatibility problem* between theology and multi-faith Religious Education'. I need to emphasise, however, that – much in contrast to Copley's account of a secular indoctrination, I am not making an empirical claim regarding the state of theology in current RE practice. Instead, my thesis responds to a compatibility problem which is identified, whether explicitly or implicitly, in various types of literature about Religious Education, rather than being identified in schools and RE classrooms, for instance. Central examples of literature sources that will be considered in the following chapters include Smart (1983), Hull (1984, 2004), Jackson (1990), Cush (1999), Cooling (2010), Conroy (2016) and Freathy and Davis (2019).

Another difference between Copley's and my research is that the main reason why I bemoan this development of a rather antagonistic view of theology and multi-faith RE is not – as Copley seems to suggest – because the resulting lack of focus on God might decrease students' chances of spiritual development in a specific theistic faith tradition or worldview (the validity of this conclusion is neither proved, nor is the appropriateness of such a goal in schools without a religious affiliation uncontested), but because it contributes, as I shall argue, to *distorted representations of theistic religions in the classroom*, thereby limiting the scope of religious understanding(s) attainable by students in RE. In this context, it should also be noted that an important realisation informing this study is that it may well be this very emphasis on students' spiritual development, found for example in Copley's idea of nurturing children's personal faith – especially when understood as a major driving force for studying theistic belief and Christian belief in particular – that perpetuates the compatibility problem described above as it maintains, rather than dissolves, the connection between focusing on theological subject matter and pursuing some kind of confessional goal in RE. Finding a way to overcome this dilemma, by (re-)defining theological content as an essential focal point in the study of theistic religions which is disconnected from confessional thinking, is therefore one of the main tasks the present study seeks to achieve[5].

However, before presenting a more detailed overview of this research project (including such aspects as research focus, overall aim and individual research objectives, etc.), I will first provide – as background to the study – a brief consideration of significant theoretical developments in RE which arguably contributed to the perceived incompatibility between theology and RE referred to above (section 1.2) and second, discuss important issues relating to the context of the non-affiliated school in terms of the implications for the teaching of Religious Education, both generally and with a focus on God-centred RE (section 1.3). This is important because, only by looking at some of the theoretical justifications for the present, rather oppositional view of the two disciplines as well as the context in which this perspective arose (a process which, as we will see below, is sometimes described in the literature as the 'marginalisation' of theology in RE), will it be possible to assess the validity of the argument for a general incompatibility of theology and non-confessional, multi-faith RE. This will also help to reveal, at the end of this introduction, how the present study (precisely by challenging these theoretical justifications) seeks to make an original contribution to the field of Religious Education.

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[5] Other scholars who have questioned the (perceived) compatibility problem between theology and Religious Education for similar reasons, hinting at the possibility that modern multi-faith RE does not necessarily have to abstain from using theological methods and focusing on theological content to be non-confessional and hence, appropriate for secular educational settings (i.e. schools without a religious affiliation), are: Chipperton, Georgiou and Wright (2016); Conroy (2016; Conroy et al., 2011); Cooling (1994a, 1996, 2010); Hull (1975c, 1984, 2004); Ipgrave (2009); Freathy, Reed, Cornwall and Davis (2014; Reed et al., 2013); Roebben (2016) and Walshe and Teece (2013).

## 1.2 A Contextualisation of Theology's Perceived 'Marginalisation' Through the Lens of Proposed Theoretical Justifications

This brief consideration of the historical context in which theology is sometimes described as having become marginalised in Religious Education will focus on a few major theoretical questions/issues related to the shift from Christian confessional Instruction to non-confessional multi-faith RE in the late 1960s and 1970s. These include Goldman's notion of 'readiness for religion' (1964, 1965) and its influence on Biblical Studies in the context of RE; differentiations between confessionalism and non-confessionalism[6] and their disciplinary associations with Theology and Religious Studies (RS), that is Phenomenology, in particular; and broader questions of objectivity and rationality in the study of religions. It is, however, not my intention to provide a detailed historical analysis of all developments in RE theory and practice since the phenomenological revolution of the 1970s, nor is it my goal to provide evidence in support of the empirical claim that theology has been (and possibly also continues to be) marginalised in Religious Education. What is more important to the research focus of the present study is to gain insight – through an analysis of relevant literature – into the effects these developments have had on how theology was *perceived* in RE circles, following this shift from neo-confessional, (liberal Christian) experiential to phenomenological RE. This is because, as explained in the previous section, my research is mainly concerned with a theoretical problem, identifiable in RE literature as the problem of '(perceived) incompatibility' between theology and multi-faith RE, and my main aim (see also sections 1.4 to 1.6) is to assess whether the different explanations given by key figures in this debate (e.g. with regard to why theology might have been marginalised in multi-faith Religious Education) are tenable, theoretically. Therefore, the guiding question of this chapter is not so much whether the different issues considered below really caused the marginalisation of theology or not, but whether they *should have done*, in theoretical terms. The present section starts by summarising key issues to consider in this theoretical analysis, whereas subsequent sections and chapters will be more concerned with providing an evaluation and possible solution to this assumed compatibility problem.

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[6] Note that this discussion focuses mainly on the shift of confessional (liberal Christian) to non-confessional (multi-faith) RE in the late 1960s/70s and disciplinary associations with Theology and Religious Studies as well as the question of whether the former involves a risk of indoctrination. A closer (more general, philosophical) consideration of the three terms, 'confessional', 'non-confessional' and 'indoctrination' in the context of RE will follow in chapter 3.

- **Goldman's 'Readiness for Religion' – Child-Centred, Developmental RE**

One important trigger of change which is often identified in RE literature as having paved the way to new approaches to teaching Religious Education in the 1960s, divorced from Christian theology, is Ronald Goldman's *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence*, first published in 1964, and *Readiness for Religion: A Basis for Developmental Religious Education*, published a year later (see Freathy & Parker, 2013; Grimmitt, 2000; Pett & Cooling, 2018). Drawing upon Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development (1954, 1964, 1969) and Erik Erikson's views of children's processes of personal, social and emotional maturation (1963, 1968), Goldman argued in these two works for a pedagogical shift away from traditional Christian Instruction to a more child-centred Religious Education which would take into account the limits to understanding set by the developmental stages of children's mental maturation and personal experience. His main conclusion was that understanding certain genres of Biblical texts such as parables and miracle accounts requires intellectual capacities students of RE do not possess before their mid-teenage years (Goldman, 1964, 1965). Together with like-minded researchers such as Harold Loukes (1961, 1965) and Richard Acland (1963), similarly influential in the field of Religious Instruction (RI) in the mid-60s, Goldman thus campaigned for a psychologically-informed, developmental RI dedicated to being relevant to students' everyday lives and experiences, rather than 'centred on abstract religious ideas or the essentially academic study of the Bible' (Freathy & Parker, 2013).

These pedagogical views faced various criticisms[7], most of which attacked Goldman's key premise about the link between children's developmental stage of intellectual maturity and the corresponding (in-)comprehensibility of abstract theological content (see for example, Bruner, 1966, 1977; Linnet Smith, 1998; Murphy, 1977). However, what these criticisms, focusing primarily on the validity (i.e. logical internal consistency) of Goldman's readiness-for-religion argument, do not reveal is that, *at a deep theological level*, Goldman's approach was highly controversial – not just from perspectives opposed to Christian confessionalism in RE but also from a Christian viewpoint itself – and could thus be said to have prepared the ground for later suspicions towards theology within Religious Education practice. Trying to integrate the latest findings of psychological research with theological considerations about Christian education, Goldman had basically come to the conclusion that religious affairs and abstract theological thought, in particular, were adult business only as children's minds were simply not made for these things. Given that, according to this developmental theory of religious understanding, children under a certain age (in their mid-teenage years) are mentally incapable of grasping complex theological ideas and concepts such as God's holiness and human sinfulness or the meaning of Christ's death as substitutionary atonement, it was possible to assume that any form of Christian Instruction aimed at children's true conversion to Christianity was logically impossible and hence, non-sensical to pursue. It is important to understand, though, that for some RE professionals this did not just put into question the reasonableness of RI practice, but also fundamental theological convictions including the infallibility of God, the universality of Jesus's teachings and ultimately also, divine justice. In *Teaching for Spiritual Growth: An Introduction to Christian Education* (1994), Perry G. Down summarises the theological problem involved in Goldman's pedagogy as follows:

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[7] Murphy criticised Goldman's view by attacking its limited application of Piaget's model to religious abstraction only (Murphy, 1977). He claimed that Piaget's 'ascending' three-stage pattern of cognitive development, (according to which a child passes from initial 'concrete' understanding, unable to decode symbols and abstract concepts, through to an intermediate stage where such an ability emerges, to the full scope of logical and formal operational thinking), manifests itself not just in RE, but throughout a child's interaction with the whole school curriculum. This, he argued, allows for the speculation that limits to understanding may differ from subject to subject, if not also from one child to another. Some children might handle abstraction with ease in History, but think concretely about French grammar, for example, and it is unclear what this implies for *religious* understanding, specifically (Burt, 2003, 330; Murphy, 1977).

Linnet Smith objected that one could reinterpret Goldman's findings to indicate a correlation not between developmental stages and religious understanding as such, but between different 'levels' of understanding and church attendance as well as personal religious upbringing taking place at home (Linnet Smith, 1998). An empirical study carried out by Paul Burt in 2003 focusing, among other things, on students' understanding of the abstract idea of divine communication also suggests, in accordance with these earlier criticisms, that there might be a link between students' religious understanding of abstract Biblical content such as God's communication with Moses in the story of the Burning Bush and 'the frequency of their exposure to prayer in the context of assemblies' and school worship more generally (Burt, 2003, 338). Burt's research was carried out at an independent preparatory school for boys between the ages of 7 and 13, following the format used by Goldman's study in 1964. 60 boys were interviewed (10 from each year group from Year 3 to Year 8). Participants were read the stories of Moses and the Burning Bush, The Crossing of the Red Sea, and Jesus' Temptations. They were interviewed through questions designed to shed light on a number of ideas about God including how God communicates with people and the meaning of God's nature, power and holiness (Burt, 2003, 331).

Bruner pointed to the importance of students' 'first-order experience' in understanding (here: theological/religious) concepts (Bruner, 1966, 1977). He rejected Goldman's notion of 'readiness' and claimed instead that it is possible for young students to understand abstract concepts, intuitively, so long as these are first translated into terms which make sense to them at their given developmental stage and are also approached within the context of their own experiences and understanding(s) of human interaction, in particular. The key educational problem found in Goldman's theory, or Piagetian tests more broadly, was therefore sometimes referred to as 'dis-embedded thinking': the fact that children and teenagers are expected to grasp the meaning of abstract concepts outside any context of events that would be meaningful to them at a personal, experiential level (see Hawes, 1965; Hilliard, 1965).

> 'But while there is much to be said regarding the developmental capabilities of children and the implications of these capabilities to Christian education, *can we conclude that it is impossible for children to be true Christians*? The issue revolves around the question of what God requires for salvation. To what extent is the understanding of propositional truth necessary for salvation?' (Down, 1994, 212, my emphasis)

These are uncomfortable theological questions. If it were true that possessing a certain level of understanding of abstract theological concepts and teachings is a necessary requirement for being a Christian, it could ultimately be argued by some, rather controversially, that children, should they die before they reach their biologically determined age of cognitive and spiritual maturity, cannot be saved by the blood of Christ. This raises difficult questions for Christians about God's nature, i.e. whether such attributes as benevolence, mercy and omnipotence can be assigned to him with credibility. How could a loving, all-powerful God – one might ask, for instance – allow people to be damned for the rest of eternity if the reason they did not become 'true Christians' in their lifetime is that God himself created them in a way that prevents them from reaching the cognitive stage required for this task? (It goes without saying that this theory could also have questionable implications for the salvation of those who are mentally challenged.)

But this is not all: saying that the mind of a child is neither physically nor mentally prepared to even begin to understand abstract theological content such as that expressed by Jesus in his parables also implies that Jesus's teachings are accessible to humankind only to a limited extent. Therefore, pushing the argument to extremes, one could even go as far as to say that Goldman's theory criticised (at least indirectly) not just common Religious Education practices, but also the pedagogical choices of Jesus Christ himself. Even though there is certainly room to defend Goldman's argument against such criticisms (one could ask, for example: can one ever fully understand theological subject matter? And: how is the claim that complete understanding is a pre-requisite for salvation justified, theologically?), it should nevertheless be evident that the idea of 'readiness for religion' had problematic theological implications, which, understandably, were met with unease by many Christian and non-Christian educators in the 1960s. This explains why Goldman's developmental RE (together with other theoretical developments considered below) has been recognised in the literature as a contributing factor in the creation of non-confessional Religious Education – a subject area, in which theology apparently struggles to find its place to this day (compare Freathy and Davis's 2019 article: Theology in Multi-Faith Religious Education: A Taboo to Be Broken? which will be discussed in chapter 5).

- **From Christian Neo-Confessional to Non-Confessional, Phenomenological RE**

Another theoretical issue frequently mentioned in the literature with regard to the place of theology in Religious Education is the question of indoctrination and its possible connection with confessional types of RE. According to Gerald Parsons (1994), the late 1960s saw a shift from the child-centred, neo-confessional (that is, liberal theological) Christian Instruction described above to a more phenomenological[8], non-confessional version of Religious Education, committed to explore not just Christianity, but also Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism from an *etic* (outsider's) perspective, in short: non-confessional multi-faith RE (Parsons, 1994, 173-174). As indicated in section

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[8] The Phenomenology of Religion can be summarised as an approach to the study of world religions that attempts to explore the '*self-understanding*' of each individual tradition in an empathetic, yet academically objective way by '*bracketing*' presuppositions and personal opinions (Allen, 2010, 203-224). In the context of Religious Studies (at university level), this approach, introduced by Smart in the 1970s, involved two central ideas: the idea of adopting a 'phenomenological *epoché*' – the antireductionist appeal to suspend one's own beliefs about reality; and the idea of developing an 'eidetic vision' by seeing experiential phenomena merely as phenomena and gaining 'insight into their essential structures' (Allen, 2010, 209). The first projects dedicated to applying such phenomenological methods to the context of Religious Education were the Schools Council Lancaster RE Projects under the direction of Smart. In the *Schools Council Working Paper 36* (SCWP) (School Council, 1971), this interpretation of phenomenology was translated into three different educational intentions requiring distinct types of interaction between students and the given religious content. First, it was argued, students should study 'the tradition's self-understanding in an empathetic and non-evaluative manner'. Second, by examining religious issues, beliefs, practices and the ways in which religion contributes to human culture, phenomenologically, students should develop an understanding of religion(s) 'founded on accurate information, rationally understood and considered in the light of all relevant facts'. And third, students should engage in a process of continuous (self-)reflection, bringing into dialogue their own experiences with those of religious adherents in different cultural contexts and times (School Council, 1971, 44-45). For a more detailed consideration of the phenomenological approach in the general context of Religious Studies, see chapter 'Phenomenology of Religion' in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (Allen, 2010, 203-224).

1.1, this was due to the fact that theories of Religious Instruction (increasingly known as 'Religious Education' from then on) had to take into account the ongoing processes of secularisation and cultural and religious diversification of British society (Copley, 2005; Freathy & Parker, 2013; Grimmitt, 2000; Hull, 1975b, 1984; Jackson, 1990; Parsons, 1994). In this new context, confessional Religious Instruction was suspected of enabling indoctrination of Christian dogma and values, which no longer suited the educational demands of an increasingly pluralistic, secular society. An example of an attempt coming from Christian educators to respond to the charge of indoctrination in Christian theology-centred RE amidst these pedagogical changes can be found in Cooling and Cooling's 'Christian Doctrine in Religious Education' from 1987 (see Cooling & Cooling, 1987, pp. 154-158).

Similarly, the drive to distance the subject of Religious Education from associations with any form of religious indoctrination was also reflected in the research literature of that time. Parsons identifies three influential publications that reflect this trend among theorists of Religious Education of the late 1960s to renounce the previously maintained religious and spiritual functions of (confessional) Religious Instruction (Parsons, 1994). These are Edwin Cox's *Changing Aims in Religious Education* (1966), James W. D. Smith's *Religious Education in a Secular Setting* (1969) and Ninian Smart's *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion* (1968). By comparison, the new version of RE, referred to as the 'Phenomenological, Undogmatic, Explicit Model' by Michael Grimmitt, in his *Pedagogies of Religious Education* (2000), employed a descriptive approach to the study of the world religions, respectful of the self-understanding of individual traditions and the subjective experiences of religious adherents, following the principles of empathy and what is known as *epoché*, suspended judgment achieved by *bracketing* personal presuppositions and opinions whilst studying religions (Grimmitt, 2000, 26-27). Although Grimmitt does not make explicit his reasons for including the term 'undogmatic' in this title, it can be surmised that the word indicates the general move away of the subject from theological and doctrinal aspects of religions, and Christian theology in particular, to a more 'reflective process' of learning, meant to engage students in a dialogue between their own experience and the living religions, a point that has also been made by Philip Barnes and Andrew Wright (Barnes, 2006; Barnes & Wright, 2006). This is also reflected in the list of contents included in the Chichester Project of the Shap Working Party (1977-1992), which was dedicated to applying the phenomenological methodology to the study of the Christian tradition as part of the broader world religions approach. This list includes as focal points for the study of

Christianity: Christian communities, literature, art, music and festivals; Christian individuals; Christian spirituality as well as Christian ethics, but does not make reference to Christian theological concepts and teachings, except indirectly, perhaps, by including the hypernym 'beliefs' as one object of study (see Grimmitt, 2010, 57). John Hull (who was more of a representative of the liberal Christian theological, experiential version of RE himself, and concerned, specifically, with proving that the new world religions approach was compatible with Christian Religious Education, both practically and at a theoretical, theological level) evaluated this 'movement away from Christian doctrinal instruction and Biblical and theological teachings' as an attempt to introduce a new type of Religious Education that was 'neutral' towards differing religious and non-religious schools of thought, i.e. the six major world religions and secular ideologies such as humanism and communism (Hull, 1984, 109; see also Freathy & Parker, 229, 2013).

Reflecting on the impact of Smart's phenomenology (Smart, 1968, 1983, 1999; Smart & Horder, 1976) and in particular, Working Paper 36 (School Council, 1971), Denise Cush writes that the new pedagogical approach to non-confessional RE was 'an attempt to put aside prejudice and preconceptions' in the study of religions to be able to 'empathise with the believer's point of view', independent of the student's own religious or non-religious affiliations (Cush, 1999, 38). For Smart, this meant Religious Education – or the study of religion(s), more generally – had to be divorced from Theology, which he saw as requiring faith commitment on the part of the student and involving a necessary engagement with, if not acceptance of, the truth claims of the religion (here: Christianity) from which theological investigations are undertaken (Smart, 1983; compare Brine 2016a and 2016b for recent examples of this view). Theology, in other words, was regarded as incompatible with the objectivity or value-neutrality expected from phenomenological Religious Education, reflected for example in the idea of *epoché* (compare Freathy & Davis, 2019). Or, as Jackson explains, 'theologically loaded' confessional approaches to Religious Education came to be viewed as 'distasteful' by many teachers as they were seen as involving the risk of 'intellectual and cultic indoctrination', compared with the much more 'impartial study' of religions offered in Working Paper 36 (Jackson, 1990, 108). One direct result of this development was that, from the 1960s onwards, 'significantly less attention was given to explicit study of the Bible' (Pett & Cooling, 2018, 258) – a trend which, as I have argued above, was also visible in the Christian-focused Chichester Project, for instance.

As this analytical consideration of relevant literature further demonstrates, another oft-cited consequence of these pedagogical changes was that the disciplinary relationship between the desired Religious Studies approach and Theology became increasingly oppositional, rather than complementary. Theology, according to Smart, was defined as a faith-requiring practice undertaken from within a particular faith tradition; and Religious Studies was viewed as much more open-minded, cross-cultural/interreligious, potentially comparative, and most notably, multi-methodological (i.e. combining methods from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives including Sociology, History, Psychology, Anthropology and Linguistics) (Smart, 1983). As Copley claims (2008), collaboration between religious educators and academic subject specialists involved in the study of religion(s) – post-Working Paper 36 – was therefore mainly geared towards the new world religions approach, while Theology was criticised for being 'biased', that is 'implicitly' linked with Christianity and the risk of Christian indoctrination. On the other hand, though, it is argued that academics in the field of Theology, too, made little effort to engage themselves in Religious Education, and to shape the subject's future following the phenomenological revolution, which has led to a regrettable lack of dialogue between professional theologians and RE professionals persisting to this day (Copley, 2008, 205-207; compare Conroy, 2016). Hence, it is evident that the main theoretical justification for the charge of disciplinary incompatibility, reflected in these literature sources, can be found in a particular view of theology as a confessional Christian practice which necessitates faith commitment and opens the door to indoctrination.

- **Objectivity and Rationality – Hirst's Critical View of Religious Education**

Given the above considerations, it is useful to take a closer look at the ways in which issues of objectivity/neutrality and rationality have been discussed in the context of Religious Education – with a view to exploring academic perspectives on how corresponding debates may have shaped RE's relationship with Theology. Paul Hirst's contributions to this research area in the Philosophy of Education of the 1970s constitute a useful starting point for this analytical endeavour. Hirst argued that education, in order to be objective[9] and rational, had to comply with what can be called the 'secularisation of knowledge' (see Hirst, 1974c, 68) and should therefore reject any affiliation, or reliance on religious beliefs in primary or secondary schools, which is why he also condemned, as a matter of principle, the existence of faith schools (Hirst, 1972, 1974c, 1981). For him, rationality was a universal characteristic, shared by all human beings irrespective of their cultural backgrounds, thus constituting part of their humanity. Moreover, he classified only those ideas which were derived, exclusively, from rational thinking as universal and objective in nature; ideas founded on religious beliefs, by contrast, were evaluated as subjective and necessarily problematic (Hirst, 1972). That these considerations and the questions they raise are still relevant to the practice of Religious Education today can be seen in the fact that a number of recent publications concentrate on the relationship between such issues as rationality, objectivity and secularisation on the one hand, and Religious Education on the other, thereby often criticising (either explicitly or implicitly) Hirst's conclusions about the nature and methodological scope of RE. Here one might point to Barnes (2002, 2007a, 2007b); Cooling (2010); Copley (2005); Freathy and Parker (2013); O'Grady (2005, 2009) and Teece (2005), most of which will be discussed in more detail below.

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[9] The 'argument from objectivity' in Religious Education has been identified by Cooling as one of two strands within Hirst's philosophy that are still influential in the delivery of RE today (the other one being the 'argument from fairness' evident, for example, in the British Humanist Association's (BHA) campaign for the inclusion of non-religious worldviews in the RE curriculum) (Cooling, 2010, 17-21).

It has been argued (see Cooling, 2010 and Freathy & Parker, 2013 below) that this negative attitude to religion in educational contexts had a great impact on the way Religious Education developed in subsequent years and that it still continues to influence the subject community, especially teachers of RE, to a great extent today. To examine these perspectives more closely, I will first look at how Hirst's philosophy is said to have impacted on curriculum development, precisely in the subject's years of change from confessional to non-confessional Religious Education (between 1963 and 1975), and return to evaluations of the current state of RE teaching afterwards. Regarding the former phase – sometimes referred to as the 'religious crisis of the 1960s' (see, for example, Brown, 2010 or McLeod, 2007), Freathy and Parker argue that secularists and humanist organisations such as the National Secular Society (NSS) and the British Humanist Society (BHA), having adopted Hirst's stress on the significance of objectivity, rationality and universality in education, 'undertook, concerted and organised campaigns with the intention of either abolishing RI (often, but not always as distinct from the emerging concept of RE), establishing a secular alternative (such as moral education), or secularising the subject's aims and broadening its content to include world religions and secular worldviews' (Freathy & Parker, 2013, 239). Interestingly, however, this secularist/humanist influence on RE (which coincided with a social and cultural revolution leading to the 'institutional marginalisation' and 'cultural displacement' of Christianity) is not only described as a force imposing itself upon Religious Education, from the outside as it were, but also as a process cohering with the vision of a new form of RE articulated by numerous academics and professionals associated with the subject including Hull and countless members of the Christian Education Movement in the 1960s/70s (Freathy & Parker, 2013, 239, 246). Thus, Freathy and Parker explain that many Christian and non-Christian educators collaborated with humanists at the time to develop new approaches to Religious Education that embraced the idea of an objective/academic study of both religious and non-religious worldviews, thereby overcoming, deliberately, the former confessionalism of (theologically orientated) Christian instruction (Freathy & Parker, 2013, 254). This historical analysis[10], however, will not be further developed in this thesis because identifying the exact reason or reasons for such collaboration between religious educators and secularist/humanist lobbying groups in the curriculum development of RE is not crucial to the argument of the present study. What is relevant to the question of the (potential) marginalisation of theology is *the practical result of this phase*: the emergence of a new form of multi-faith Religious Education, divorced from the confessionalism of traditional theology-centred Christian Instruction (1944 to mid-1960s), and manifested officially for the first time in the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus of 1975 (Birminham City Education Committee, 1975).

Further to this, an analysis of Hirst's influence on current RE practice and the role and status of theology, in particular, has been offered by Trevor Cooling in *Doing God in Education* (2010). Supported by the findings of Lynn Revell and Rosemary Walters's study of Christian student teachers' views on objectivity and professionalism from the same year, Cooling points out that teacher trainees who see themselves as Christians are 'generally hesitant about sharing their faith in lessons', judging this to be 'unprofessional' behaviour for religious educators (Cooling, 2010, 18). The two main findings in Revell and Walters's study to cite here are that most trainee teachers who consider themselves as Christians believe that sharing their faith with students could be unprofessional, whereas most agnostic and atheist student teachers believe that sharing their lack of faith is a potentially positive contribution to their teaching and by no means problematic or unprofessional behaviour (Revell & Walters, 2010). Yet, according to these researchers, this is problematic because it establishes a false link between lack of belief/religiosity and objectivity in the study of religion(s), which ignores the fact that secularism, atheism and agnosticism are also 'identifiable belief positions', rather than neutral stances to take in the classroom (Revell & Walters, 2010, 8). This resonates with Copley's argument that RE professionals often seem to be so concerned today to present themselves as non-confessional/objective that they are reinforcing the impression that only those teachers who do not believe in God or are at least agnostics are able to avoid bringing the 'baggage' of religious indoctrination into the classroom (Copley, 2005). On the contrary, being non-religious, as a teacher, tends to be associated with the values of neutrality, objectivity and freedom from religious 'clutter' (see Norman, 2004).

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[10] Contemplating potential reasons why these religious educators entered such a collaboration, Freathy and Parker suggest that Christians could have been influenced by wider societal, political, but also theological developments such as the emergence of radical secular theology, which supported the idea of a 'secular society', or by moderate Anglican reformism, which promoted 'the secularisation of the State and its law in order to differentiate it from, and thereby to protect, the Church and Christian morality' (Freathy & Parker, 2013, 255). Alternatively, they argue, the non-confessional revolution in RE could be interpreted either positively, as the result of a 're-positioning of Christianity and the churches within the new secular and religiously plural context', especially that of larger cities, or negatively as a desperate attempt to counter the ongoing 'legislative change resulting from persistent charges of indoctrination' in a way that allowed them to retain some control for the Church on state-maintained schools (Freathy & Parker, 2013, 255). See also Brown, 'What was the Religious Crisis of the 1960s?' (C. Brown, 2010) and Doney, J. 'The Overlooked Ecumenical Background to the Development of English Religious Education' in (Eds.) S. Parker, R. Freathy and L. Francis (2015).

This latter view is evident, for example, in the writings of contemporary humanists who campaign for a radical reform of multi-faith Religious Education, if not the complete abandonment of the subject as it exists today. Use of the notion of 'clutter' in this context goes back to the works of Richard Norman, i.e. *On Humanism* (2004) and *The Case for Secularism: A Neutral State in an Open Society* (BHA, 2007, edited by Norman), both of which are distributed by the BHA. In these texts, Norman – like Hirst – expresses a view of humanity that centres upon the capacity for rational thought as the main criterion for what it means to be human. Human beings, he argues, flourish best in environments that promote rationality. Rationality, in turn, includes morality because the rational nature of human beings is also evidenced by the moral values they share as members of culturally diverse societies (Norman, 2004). However, the reason why these moral values are universal and objective, according to Norman, is precisely because they are 'independent from religious belief'; which leads him to the conclusion that religious beliefs are nothing but 'clutter' that needs to be removed from the public realm of education by the 'free-thinking' humanist tradition (Norman, 2004, 114-118).

In the context of RE, Cooling refers to this problematic argument, which he identifies as 'clearly Hirstian' due to its focus on free thought in education, as the humanist 'objectivity argument' (Cooling, 2010, 20). It rests on the premise that only religion-free educational settings can further free thinking and thus, individual autonomy, in children because religious belief is 'private clutter' that merely distracts from the cultivation of the rationality-based moral values shared by all humans independent of their religious/non-religious convictions (see Cooling, 2010, 22). The example he provides is a poster advertised by the BHA as part of their famous billboard campaign, in this case of the year 2009, that pictured a little girl accompanied by the slogan: 'Please, don't label me. Let me grow up and choose for myself'. This could be interpreted as an expression of the humanist belief that children, in order to become autonomous in their thinking, need to be protected from the potential indoctrinating power of religion. Yet, Cooling argues, these assertions actually contradict the humanist argument for objectivity in education. Looking at the provocative tone of the slogan, it is quite obvious that these campaigners do not just want young people to be free to choose between religious and non-religious worldviews in their lives (because this would imply equality between the two options), but that they really wish for children to be 'unencumbered by religious clutter' *so as to be able* to become objective, rational free-thinkers, which is a position that is openly hostile to religion and hence, anything but objective (Cooling, 2010, 21). Cooling therefore concludes that Hirstian-influenced views of the role of religion in education do much more than portraying religious belief as 'irrational clutter', they often assume at the same time that this clutter is also dangerous and 'toxic' to young minds (Cooling, 2010, 23).

It goes without saying that this also affects the way in which some humanists portray belief in God. In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins ridicules Christian belief in God, for example, as a primitive superstition comparable to believing in the 'tooth fairy' (Dawkins, 2006); and (as Cooling points out) Norman proposes an idea of theistic belief as involving the somewhat paranoid conviction that there exists a divine being whose sole interest it is to command people 'to live in the right way' and to 'punish those who disobey' (Norman, 2004, 135). Moreover, Cooling states that a similar view was evident in the atheist bus advertising campaign initiated by journalist Ariane Sherine (and officially supported by Dawkins) in 2008, which claimed: 'There is probably no god. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.' In both cases, belief in God is reduced to a phenomenon in the human psyche that deludes people's minds, fills their lives with fear and thus, hinders rather than helps human flourishing (compare Cooling, 2010). This juxtaposition of religious (here: theistic) belief as irrational/subjective (if not deluded) and atheism/agnosticism as rational/objective is reminiscent of a distinction drawn by Hirst in the context of education, namely between 'primitive' and 'sophisticated' educational approaches. For Hirst, a 'primitive' approach is one that passes on the subjective, irrationally held beliefs of a given culture, without questioning them (which enables indoctrination to occur), whereas a 'sophisticated' approach commits itself to the transmission of only those ideas which are 'universal norms of rationality' and 'objective knowledge' (Hirst, 1981, 85-87, 89-95). From such a perspective, it is evident, any type of seriously God-centred (Religious) Education must be opposed on the grounds of the supposed damaging effects it might have on children's psychological development. This demonstrates that the question of (ir-) reconcilability, e.g. between the ideas of God-centred teaching and rationality-based/neutrality-based approaches to education, plays an important role in this academic debate.

It is possible to question the validity and internal consistency of some of Cooling's assertions – as Norman himself has done in his (2012) reply to *Doing God in Education*. One criticism which Norman has raised, for example, is that Cooling's presentation of the humanist argument from objectivity is based on a 'reverse fairness argument' which does not stand up to scrutiny. From this perspective, Cooling's thoughts on fairness in education can be summarised as follows:

> 'All knowledge-claims are located within one or another comprehensive worldview, a religious or non-religious framework of ultimate beliefs and values through which the rest of knowledge is interpreted. It is impossible to be neutral as between different worldviews. Consequently, attempts to exclude the influence of religion from educational practice in the name of neutrality will not really be neutral. They will amount to the privileging of a humanist worldview, and as such they will be unfair to the religious.' (Norman, 2012, 516)

In other words, according to Norman's interpretation of Cooling's claims, all attempts to achieve fairness in education *through neutrality* are doomed to failure and are actually unfair because that 'purported neutrality' is in reality 'humanism by default' – hence, his choice of the term 'reverse fairness argument' (Norman, 2012, 521). However, the assertion that neutral education is impossible, so Norman replies, is unconvincing. Even in educational situations (or subjects) in which values enter into activities and disciplines, these values themselves can be neutral between different worldviews (Norman, 2012, 517). He therefore also questions Cooling's concept of a distinctively Christian approach, reflected not only in the school ethos (e.g. in Christian school worship/assemblies), but also in the teaching of individual subjects and subject content. In the latter case, Cooling proposes an example of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) teaching, embedded in a specifically Christian ethical framework. Since the dominant model in MFL textbooks is that of the learner as tourist, Christian language teachers could model their teaching around the idea of 'hospitality to the stranger' thus developing students' appreciation for 'openness and curiosity' towards others (Cooling, 2010, 42). Norman points out, however, that the values of hospitality and openness are by no means 'distinctively Christian':

> 'But in this example the value which informs the chosen model of relationships – the value of hospitality to strangers – seems to me to be a genuinely shared value, and to be neutral as between different worldviews.' (Norman, 2012, 518)

Moreover, Norman claims, the reverse argument that excluding questions of faith, belief or (e.g. personal) worldview from the teaching of seemingly value-free subjects such as science is unfair to religion is also invalid – here the assumption of neutrality rests on the premise that the subject content of science is neutral in nature. In this case, Cooling assumes that a lack of consideration of such questions conceals the fact that scientists always practise their science within the context of personal (religious and/or non-religious) worldviews, which could be interpreted by students to mean that science itself is 'set within a framework where the absence of God is taken for granted' (see Cooling, 2010, 49). Again, Norman sees this as erroneous thinking. The mere fact that such broader questions are not raised in science lessons (when teaching is confined to the value-free scientific content) does not mean that such teaching presupposes the unreality of God's existence. For Norman, it simply means that questions of faith and belief are not addressed in the subject, and there is no reason to assume that this act reflects any unfairness to the religious in the context of education (Norman, 2012, 520). However, regardless of these questions of argumentative correctness on both sides of the debate, it is arguable that the nature of the debate itself reveals something important about the perceived relationship between religiously motivated approaches to education (including religiously motivated, God-centred RE), on the one hand, and such values as objectivity, neutrality and rationality on the other hand – namely that the extent to which these things are reconcilable with one another, at a theoretical level, is at least worth discussing.

To summarise: the main purpose of this section was to consider key arguments found in the relevant literature for a possible marginalisation of theology in Religious Education and to analyse these arguments through the lens of proposed theoretical justifications for this (perceived) development. In this process, several theoretical justifications for an exclusion of – or at least strong opposition to – theology and theological subject matter in the context of Religious Education have been identified in the writings of key researchers in the field of RE. The main justifications considered here were: (i) theology is biased and implicitly linked with Christianity, which makes it a confessional practice involving the danger of indoctrination; (ii) theology requires faith commitment on the part of the students, which inevitably entails engagement with, if not acceptance of, the truth claims of the given faith tradition (e.g. Christianity) – for this reason, theology is not compatible with any vision of an 'objective', 'value-neutral' study of different religions; (iii) Theology and Religious Studies are oppositional, not complementary disciplines, of which only the latter provides adequate methods and methodological viewpoints to adopt in multi-faith RE; and (iv) theology, understood as a faith-requiring practice, is based on irrationally held beliefs (e.g. of the existence of God) which are inappropriate to promote in schools (without a religious affiliation) as they can have negative effects on children's psychological/cognitive development. What all these justifications have in common is that they point to the possibility of a general irreconcilability of theology and non-confessional, multi-faith RE.

So far, this argument for a (perceived) disciplinary incompatibility, identified in the specialist literature of the subject, has been supported by three types of research findings: (i) literature that, in one way or another, opposes *theo*-centric RE in the multi-faith context (BHA, 2007; Brine 2016a, 2016b; Humanists UK, 2017; Hirst, 1972, 1974d, 1974c; Norman, 2004, 2012; Smart, 1968, 1983); (ii) literature that identifies a link between the possible marginalisation of theology in RE and its assumed irreconcilability with one or more of the values listed above (Cooling, 2010; Copley, 2005; Cush, 1999; Freathy & Davis, 2019; Hull, 1984, 2004; Ipgrave, 2009; Jackson, 1990; Pett & Cooling, 2018) and (iii) literature that criticises what could be seen as a general neglect of the transcendent in current RE practice (Conroy, 2016; Gearon 2014; Strhan, 2010; Teece, 2005, 2010a).[11] (See chapters 5 to 7 for a more detailed consideration, especially of the latter group of literature sources.) This critical consideration provides the basis for one of the main tasks to complete in this thesis (compare section 1.6), namely: assessing the extent to which these arguments are tenable, theoretically. In this way, I will demonstrate that all of the theoretical justifications outlined above *can and should be challenged* because they are based on particular views of theology which generate (or so I shall argue) a compatibility problem with the values of multi-faith Religious Education that could be avoided if only theology, or more precisely, the task of furthering theological understanding(s) in RE, were defined differently and thus viewed in a new light in this specific educational context. One such alternative vision of a theologically orientated approach, designed for the context of non-confessional, multi-faith RE in religiously unaffiliated schools, will be developed in the chapters below.

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[11] Note that this argument is further developed in my discussion of the relationship between theological understanding and (theistic) religious literacy in chapter 4. Furthermore, two recent examples of one theology-affirming and one theology-dismissing view of multi-faith Religious Education are examined in chapter 5.

As a next step, it is therefore necessary to examine this educational context more closely and with a view to exploring how the non-affiliated school differs from the affiliated school in terms of the implications for the teaching of Religious Education in general and for the promotion of God-centred RE, in particular.

## 1.3 The Framing of This Thesis: A Reflection on the Distinctive Context of Non-Confessional RE in Unaffiliated Schools

This section proposes an argument for the distinctiveness of non-confessional forms of Religious Education in unaffiliated schools, based on a consideration of the subject's legal framework as set out in the 1988 Reform Education Act (ERA). As I will show below, the key legislative text on which to concentrate in this contextualisation is the so called 'Cowper-Temple' clause, originally introduced in the 1870 Education Act, because it distinguishes clearly between the two sectors of religiously affiliated and religiously unaffiliated schools, thereby determining what is and is not legally permitted (in terms of the teaching of RE) in these two educational settings.

However, before considering this legal differentiation based on the Cowper-Temple clause more closely (and the implications it has for theology-centred RE), I will examine another contextual factor important to the task of framing the present thesis, namely the Commission on Religious Education's (CoRE) recent report: *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward – A National Plan for RE* (2018). These two contextual factors – the 1870 Education Act and CoRE (2018) – are important to the task of framing this thesis because they mark the beginning of state elementary education and the most recent policy proposal that has been made for the study of religion(s) and worldview(s) in publicly funded schools. Further to this, there are two reasons why it is crucial to look at this recent example of a vision for RE before returning to the current legal situation – the first one having to do with the position of my PhD thesis within the wider context of recent research and theoretical developments in RE and the second one being related to the issue of affiliated/unaffiliated schools and the place of theology within them. Starting with the position of my research, I should explain that this thesis was written over the course of three years (2016-2019) during which the Commission also produced its much-debated report. More precisely, the final report was published in September 2018 when the core chapters of this thesis had already been written. Although the theologically orientated approach which I propose in this thesis thus cannot be viewed as a direct response to the Commission's recommendations, it is nevertheless important to consider this current development in RE as part of the broader educational context in which my research project emerged. The second reason why the Commission's report is a critical example of a vision for RE to consider here is because it actively seeks to bridge the two sectors of affiliated and unaffiliated schools by promoting a national plan for the subject which it sees as applicable to all publicly funded schools, regardless of questions of religious affiliation. The following discussion will demonstrate why this can be problematic, specifically with regard to the task of overcoming the (perceived) compatibility problem between theology and non-confessional RE, identified in the research literature (see sections 1.1 and 1.2). Instead, I shall argue that theorising in the field of Religious Education should take proper account of different forms of Religious Education (and the sectors with which they are legally associated) that occur within England and Wales.

- **Setting this Thesis in Relation to the Commission's (2018) report *Religion and Worldviews***

The Commission's final report sets out a 'National Plan for RE' comprising eleven recommendations of which the first two are most crucial to consider here: (i) that the name of the subject should be changed to 'Religion and Worldviews' and (ii) that a 'National Entitlement to the study of Religion and Worldviews' should become statutory for all publicly funded schools, i.e. schools with and without a religious affiliation (CoRE, 2018, 11). Whilst this is not the place to provide a detailed discussion of what the name change might imply in practical terms (see Cush, 2019; Freathy & John, 2019b; Hannam & Biesta, 2019; Schweitzer, 2018) or of the extent to which this national entitlement is necessary, in this form, for the future of multi-faith RE in religiously unaffiliated schools (see Doney, 2017), it is useful to consider these recommendations – briefly at least – with regard to their implications for *what students should study and learn*, according to the Commission. As we will see, this discussion also raises important questions about contextual differences between different forms of RE in unaffiliated and affiliated schools, which (I will argue) have not been sufficiently taken into account by the Commission.

The report states that the concept of worldview should be understood in the German sense of '*Weltanschauung*', which literally means having 'a view of the world' (CoRE, 2018, 4), and can therefore be used as an umbrella term for religious and non-religious worldview traditions as well as for personal (religious and non-religious) approaches to life (CoRE, 2018, 27). In other words, the main distinction the Commission draws is not between major organised religions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism etc., on the one hand, and what could be described as religious and/or spiritual and non-religious/non-spiritual (i.e. philosophical, ethical, political, etc.) worldviews, on the other hand, but between *personal* (i.e. individualistic) interpretations of the term and *institutional* (i.e. communal) interpretations on the other hand, regardless of whether those institutional/personal worldviews have a religious and/or spiritual component or not:

> 'We use the term "institutional worldview" to describe organised worldviews shared among particular groups and sometimes embedded in institutions. These include what we describe as religions as well as non-religious worldviews such as Humanism, Secularism or Atheism. We use the term "personal worldview" for an individual's own way of understanding and living in the world, which may or may not draw from one, or many, institutional worldviews.' (CoRE, 2018, 4)

Although I recognise the argument that religions, as they have been traditionally understood and studied in multi-faith RE (i.e. the six major traditions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism) are also 'worldviews', albeit with the special attributes of being officially organised and possessing a religious dimension, I am hesitant about the usefulness of this term as a general category of curriculum content for the study of religion(s) and worldview(s). There are several reasons for this reservation. First of all, as Freathy and John argue (2019b), both terms – 'religion' and 'worldview' are, necessarily 'imprecise', due to the great internal diversity and inherent tendency of religions and worldviews to change all the time, across contexts as well as between communities and individuals. Any use of the two terms in the context of multi-faith RE must therefore reflect careful consideration of this terminological imprecision, offering students the opportunity to explore 'issues of particularity and personal agency' in religious and worldview matters (Freathy & John, 2019b, 7) as well as potential commonalities and broader concerns shared by certain types of traditions (e.g. belief in God in the case of theistic religions), and I am not sure how helpful a lack of consistent terminological differentiation between religions and other (e.g. non-religious) worldviews would be within this, already challenging, endeavour. One point I would therefore make in response to the Commission's first recommendation is that the name change, if it were implemented in all publicly funded schools, would add unnecessary complexity to an already complex arena, which might only create (further) confusions about the content, purposes and nature of different forms of Religious Education (e.g. confessional/non-confessional) in different types of schools (e.g. affiliated/unaffiliated) (compare Conroy et al., 2013 and Teece, 2011).

Moreover, one could raise the question of whether religious and spiritual approaches to life (irrespective of the question of institutionalisation) might be *more* than just worldviews (compare Hannam & Biesta, 2019, discussed in sections 4.1.2 and 4.2.1, and Schweitzer, 2018) and whether that 'something more' – however impossible to define it may be – could ultimately be lost or remain hidden from students in schools without a religious affiliation where RE itself cannot be based on religious belief, if the study of religion(s) and worldview(s) were remodelled for them in the manner of such an all-inclusive view of the concept of worldview. To answer this question, we need to consider the National Entitlement promoted by the Commission (CoRE, 2018, 34-35) as it is this second recommendation that sets out what all pupils (up to the end of Year 11) should be entitled to learn in all state-maintained schools. The National Entitlement is understood as a 'set of organising principles', forming the basis for developing programmes of study (CoRE, 2018, 32). It consists of nine points which primarily stress the significance of teaching the content of, and interaction between, worldviews, as well as the diversity that exists both within and between individual worldview traditions (see points 1, 3, 4). The Commission also suggests that students are taught about the role of religious and non-religious rituals and practices, foundational texts (if applicable), and of the arts, 'in both the formation and communications of experience, beliefs, values, identities and commitments' (see point 5) as well as about wider links between worldviews and ethical/social norms (see point 7). However, there is no further specification of what this might look like in practice, e.g. in terms of content selection in the context of particular religious worldviews such as those centring on God.

Interestingly, the whole *Religion and Worldviews* report mentions the terms 'God', 'divine', 'transcendent'/'transcendence' or 'theistic'/'theism' not even once in its one hundred pages, and the terms 'theology'/'theological' are used only twice, very generally, in the context of multi-disciplinary approaches. The first point in the list of the National Entitlement, however, emphasises that students 'must be taught about matters of central importance to the worldviews studied' (CoRE, 2018, 34). So, considering that most of the major religious traditions currently studied in RE are theistic in nature (which should arguably make 'God' an important focal point in the study of them), one could ask: should not the subject matter of the new subject Religion and Worldviews, envisioned by the Commission, be defined in such a way as to explicitly mention God, the transcendent, the divine, etc.? This issue gains even more importance if we take into account that other topics or categories of worldviews such as 'atheist'/'atheism' and 'humanist' /'humanism' are mentioned six and ten times, respectively, across the report – usually to stress the significance of studying these types of worldviews. One could therefore arrive at the question: where is there a consideration of belief in God and beliefs about God in this

'Way Forward' for RE? Or, to borrow Hannam and Biesta's expression (2019, 59): is theology, perhaps (like 'religion'[12], more generally) a 'forgotten dimension' of this report?

With regard to these questions, my own argument would be that there seem to be two main reasons for the lack of consideration of beliefs about God in the Commission's recommendations, and these have to do with the particular context(s) for which the report was written – all publicly funded schools in England and Wales, including those with and without a religious affiliation – as well as the related need to be not only applicable to, but also appropriate for these two sectors. To explain the first reason (summarised as the 'need to be all-inclusive' below), I should emphasise again that one characteristic that makes the National Entitlement new in form and content is that it aims to secure a statutory national entitlement to the study of religious and non-religious worldviews which includes all publicly funded schools and is subject to inspection, thus attempting to bridge the two sectors of affiliated and unaffiliated schools. Another change in perspective is that this proposition is based on a view of what all students should *receive* from Religion and Worldviews, regardless of the different contexts in which the subject takes place – not on a view of what (e.g. certain) schools should *provide*. As I will explain in more detail below, previous conceptualisations of RE – based on the 1988 ERA's stipulation about what the subject should consist of (Christianity plus other principal religions represented in Great Britain) only pertained to Agreed Syllabus RE, for example, which arguably contributed to a focus orientated more towards the possibility of withdrawal from the particular provision of this subject, specifically in schools without a religious affiliation. One intended outcome of the Commission's promotion of a statutory national entitlement for all publicly funded schools would therefore be that withdrawal from RE, although perhaps impossible to abolish entirely, would at least become much more contested (see also recommendation 11 in CoRE, 2018).

It can therefore be assumed, e.g. on the basis of the Commission's title choice for the interim report, *Religious Education For All* (Commission on Religious Education, 2017), as well as section 2 of that document, that one of the main reasons why the concept of worldview was chosen to describe the subject matter of Religious Education was that it has the potential to be all-encompassing, in the sense that both religious and non-religious people are able to identify with the idea of having a view of the world. In explaining the rationale behind this terminology choice, the interim report points to the fact that 53% of the British population describe themselves today as having no religion (CoRE, 2017, 19), which means that an increasing number of RE students come from non-religious backgrounds. The Commission therefore explains the appropriateness of the term 'worldviews' with regard to the specific societal setting in which multi-faith RE takes place today:

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[12] Note that Hannam and Biesta use the term 'forgotten dimension' (in their criticism of the Commission's recommendations) in relation to 'religion', understood as a special 'mode of existing' in this world, as well as in relation to 'education' (Hannam & Biesta, 2019, 58-59). For more detailed information, see sections 4.1.2 and 4.2.1 of this thesis.

> 'In a context of rapidly changing patterns of affiliation of what we commonly call religions, and the rising number of people in the UK who identify with non-religious worldviews such as Humanism, it is increasingly important for our terminology and thinking to capture this dynamism and fluidity.' (CoRE, 2017, 19)

This statement can be interpreted in different ways. For example, one could assume that, according to the Commission on Religious Education, RE should teach pupils about the 'real', that is religious/non-religious, make-up of British society today. Or one could think that RE should teach pupils about *their* personal religious/non-religious identities – as derived from an analysis of what is likely based on societal-level data such as the example given above. In both cases, the focus is shifted from teaching what is 'true' (an ontological question on which confessional Religious Instruction can be based) to what is 'popular' in terms of the types of religions and worldviews that exist in Great Britain or in terms of the numbers of people identifying with certain worldview traditions (which are empirical considerations). The Commission's focus on worldviews – and inclusion of non-religious worldviews, specifically – could hence be interpreted as a reflection of the context-specific *need to be all-inclusive* (e.g. as in being accessible to all and allowing for a plurality of perspectives) in Religious Education.

This leads me to my second argument about the main driving forces which I see behind the Commission's worldview-centred recommendations. This motivation can be identified as the *need to be as impartial as possible*, e.g. in the content selection of appropriate religious and non-religious worldviews to study in RE. This view is confirmed in a number of places in both the interim and final report of the Commission. In the section 'Constructing a Curriculum that Meets the Entitlement', the final report names the following point as the first consideration to take into account by curriculum planners: 'All pupils are entitled to experience religious education that is objective, critical and pluralistic' (CoRE, 2018, 73), and in the National Entitlement itself, it is stated: 'Teaching must promote openness, respect for others, objectivity, scholarly accuracy and critical enquiry' (CoRE, 2018, 35). Similarly, the interim report makes clear that RE should enable students 'to study worldviews from an impartial, broad and balanced perspective' (2017, 22, 23). Yet, there are several problems involved in this appeal for objectivity/impartiality in RE in publicly funded schools *with and without a religious affiliation*, which are important to discuss in this contextualisation of my thesis. For this, I will start with a brief consideration of a relevant criticism raised by Friedrich Schweitzer in 2018.

Schweitzer explains the Commission's focus on objectivity by pointing to the need of democratic states to abstain from setting religious agendas, which applies to state-sponsored education in particular, thus making 'state-supported schools (…) the true test case for religious freedom' (Schweitzer, 2018, 518). Different countries (so he argues) have attempted to guarantee religious freedom at school by offering different models of Religious Education, sometimes even concluding that there should be no such provision in state-supported schools at all (see France and the USA). He compares the current British model of RE (not the Commission's vision for Religion and Worldviews) with the German model which – given its more confessional pedagogical orientation – relies on a 'complex system of internal limitations for state influence on Religious Education, for example, by not allowing the state to determine the curriculum' (Schweitzer, 2018, 518). From his perspective, the Standing Advisory Councils for RE (SACRE) in Britain have so far fulfilled a similar function by putting syllabus production in the hands of various non-state actors. The Commission's report, on the contrary, with its focus on worldview-centred RE, suggests a different model that offers a 'type of teaching *about* religions based on complete neutrality of the subject concerning Religion and Worldviews' – a version of RE for which Luxemburg and the canton of Zurich in Switzerland have recently opted as well (Schweitzer, 2018, 518, emphasis in the text). For him, this neutrality-based model, however, is significantly flawed – not only because at a theoretical level, the idea of a completely neutral (e.g. pedagogical) standpoint in education is highly contested (see sections 1.2 and 4.1.3 for a closer consideration of this issue), but also because practical experiences of other countries with long-standing traditions of this view of RE such as Sweden have shown that it is difficult to avoid 'breaches of neutrality', thus making neutral models 'not a good place for quality Religious Education' (Schweitzer, 2018, 519; compare Cooling's discussion of the 'argument from objectivity' outlined in section 1.2). Here, one might point to the criticism raised by Kittelmann Flensner's (2015) study that Sweden's so called ‘neutral’ approach to RE ultimately teaches students that being Swedish means being neutral, which also necessitates being *non-religious* in this case.

Another problem to consider in this critical evaluation of the Commission’s appeal to objectivity can be found in the fact that the National Entitlement – as mentioned above – is intended to be introduced in all publicly funded schools, including those with and without a religious affiliation, albeit ‘retaining the flexibility for schools of all types to interpret it in accordance with their own needs, ethos and values’ (CoRE, 2018, 3). It is arguable that this reference to flexibility and interpretability of the National Entitlement, including its underlying values, creates a tension of which the report does not take sufficient account. RE given to students at voluntary aided or special-agreement schools, for example, is under the control of the managers or governors of the school and should be in accordance with any provisions of the trust deed relating to the school. Thus, it is possible to claim that it would be mainly for them to determine what is ‘objective, critical and pluralistic’ (CoRE, 2018, 35) in any given situation, and *by law* these governors have a right to determine that subjectively and from their own personal standpoint – including specific religious positions or religiously motivated attitudes to (religious) education. In such schools, RE can for example include the teaching of ‘catechisms (…) distinctive of a particular religious affiliation’ which is not the case in schools without a religious affiliation. (A closer consideration of the legal framework of RE and the Cowper-Temple clause from which this phrase is drawn is included under the next bullet point.) One could therefore argue that any attempt at implementing the Commission’s recommendations would require, beforehand, an in-depth discussion about how such a statement can be reconciled with those types of Religious Education which presuppose (and/or are taught within a school affiliated to a faith which presupposes) beliefs distinctive of a particular religious denomination. In other words, the main values promoted here – inclusivity, tolerance of plurality/diversity, impartiality, criticality, etc. – may not be as ‘context-*un*specific’ as the report implies as they could and probably would be interpreted differently in different educational settings. My main criticism of the Commission’s report is therefore that it does not take sufficient account of the legal and procedural differences and particularities of the varying school types for which it was written and the legally permissible forms of RE that occur in them (e.g. forms of RE that have a belief presupposition versus those that do not), nor does it address in any way how possible problems resulting from this lack of differentiation will be solved in the future (compare Draycott, 2018, 12).

These considerations are crucial to the present study for two main reasons. First, the values of inclusivity, tolerance and impartiality mentioned by the Commission are significant focal points in this research because, as argued in the previous sections, they are the values which are often described in the literature of Religious Education as being hard, if not impossible, to reconcile with theology or any type of God-centred RE. And second, as we have seen in this section, a closer investigation of these values demonstrates that there still are, at least at present, significant contextual differences between affiliated and non-affiliated schools which are often ignored in debates about the place of theology and theological understanding(s) in Religious Education. Although it is certainly possible to develop arguments to say that the teaching of RE in 'faith schools' *should be* controlled or restricted in some way by certain theoretical and/or policy stipulations such as those apparently envisioned by the Commission – which might then lead to a gradual softening of those boundaries – it is important to stress in this contextualisation that my argument for a theologically orientated approach to non-confessional, multi-faith RE is based on a view of the *current legal situation* and what is and is not permissible with regard to the development of theological understanding(s) in RE in this particular context.

Next, I will further examine this perceived compatibility problem (between theology and the values of non-confessional, multi-faith RE) with special regard to the distinctive legal context of schools without a religious affiliation. This will help to explain the position of the present thesis in the wider context of research in RE concerned, specifically, with the nature and limits of learning and teaching in non-affiliated schools. As I will show below, however, this appeal to the legal distinctiveness of both school sectors (affiliated/unaffiliated) should not be taken to imply that the characteristics of one type of school such as the striving for impartiality vis-à-vis certain truth claims, which may be associated more with religiously unaffiliated schools than with affiliated ones, can never be found in the other type, here: schools with a religious designation. Put simply, I neither assume that all RE in 'faith schools' is confessional, nor do I assume that all RE in 'non-faith schools' is non-confessional – although forms of RE that have belief presuppositions are, perhaps, more likely to occur in schools that have the same. In fact, it is possible to claim that the compatibility problem we are dealing with is really a 'type-of-RE problem' as opposed to a 'type-of-school' problem, namely one that occurs when we attempt to reconcile a particular confessional view of theology (e.g. defined in terms of the insider's view/faith seeking understanding) and a particular non-confessional type of RE (e.g. rooted in the values outlined above) – irrespective of the school sector in which the latter takes place in practice. Yet, such cases of overlap between the two sectors should not detract from the fact that the legal framework and Cowper-Temple clause, in particular, set up a binary distinction between these institutional contexts on the basis of which 'non-confessional RE in the non-affiliated school' can at least be established as an important and distinctive *theoretical category* to consider in this thesis.

### • Contextualising this Thesis with Regard to the Legal Framework of the Unaffiliated School

To work out how and why Religious Education in religiously unaffiliated schools is contextually distinctive, in the sense that its legal context differs from that of schools with a religious designation, we need to consider the legal framework of RE. As Jonathan Doney points out (Doney, forthcoming), the current legislative framework within which Religious Education operates is based on the 1988 Education Reform Act, the provisions of which were repeated in subsequent Acts of Parliament, including the 1996 Education Act, 1998 Schools Standards and Framework Act and 2011 Education Act. Here, Doney foregrounds that, despite the developing complexity of the legislative terminology relating to schools with and without a religious foundation, compounded by the expansion of Academies and Multi-Academy Trusts (MAT) (whereby a religious group can run a MAT within which some individual schools do not have a religious affiliation), the legal framework relating to Religious Education has not kept pace. For example, within the legislation, there have been changes whereby the terms used in the 1944 Education Act ('county' and 'controlled' schools) have been replaced, yet the *religious provisions* set out in that act, with key amendments in 1988, remain the basis on which RE is legislated for. However, what is of greatest importance in the context of this study is the distinction in law between those schools *with* a religious affiliation or foundation, and those *without*. The current legal framework describes the first of these as being schools 'with a religious character' (Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998, §58).

Thus, the law currently requires that all maintained[13] schools – that is, schools funded by the state, whether directly from the Department for Education and Skills (DES) or via the Local Education Authority (LEA), must provide 'an act of collective worship' (1988 ERA, §6); a curriculum that is 'balanced and broadly based' (§2) and which 'promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society' (§2a) through the provision of a 'Basic Curriculum', which comprises 'provision of religious education for all pupils registered at the school' (§2(1)(a)) and The National Curriculum (§2(1)(b)). In all maintained schools, under the 1988 Act (and subsequent legislation), there exists a right of parental withdrawal from either collective worship, Religious Education or both (§9(3)). However, there are a number of legislative differences between schools with and schools without a religious affiliation; these categorical legal distinctions create circumstances in which – at least in theory – the practice of RE may differ profoundly in these different schools. Or, to be more precise, the law positively permits the practice of RE to differ profoundly in these different contexts, which means that an explicit legal difference is stipulated here. So, for example, under §25 and §30 of the 1944 Education Act respectively, schools *with* a religious affiliation are permitted to apply religious tests to both students and teaching staff, this provision having not been repealed under the 1988 ERA. This is important because it heightens the chances – again, in theory at least – that there is a convergence in these schools between the faith that is being taught, the faith of the teacher doing the teaching, and the faith of the students who are doing the learning. As a consequence, confessional conceptions of theology, e.g. as insiders making sense of their own faith, would be less problematic in such a scenario, although as recognised and further discussed below, the empirical reality of such school settings is often more complex.

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[13] Note that 'maintained school' is the legal term for schools funded by the state, whether directly (Grant Maintained Schools, Academies, Free schools) or indirectly through the LEA system.

Moreover, and perhaps most pertinent to the arguments within this thesis, the nature of the Religious Education provided in affiliated and non-affiliated schools is legislatively different. Under section 2(1)(a) of the 1988 Education Reform Act (which itself draws on sections 26-28 of the 1944 Education Act), teaching of Religious Education in schools *with* a religious affiliation, must be in accordance with the trust deed of the particular school (§8(2) and §86(2)(a)). For those schools *without* a religious affiliation, this teaching *must* be in accordance with an Agreed Syllabus document (§8(2)) which must itself 'reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain' (§8(3)). As explained in more detail below, the scope of this statement is further restricted by the Cowper-Temple clause which stipulates, clearly, that the subject content specified in this Agreed Syllabus text (Christianity plus other major religions) must not be approached from any particular confessional viewpoint, which would include the aforementioned example of theological approaches interpreted in the sense of 'faith seeking understanding' (see section 5.1.1 for more information). (Responsible for the production of the locally Agreed Syllabus for RE are the Agreed Syllabus Conference and SACRE of the given region.)[14]

Two aspects of the legal changes of 1988 to examine more closely with regard to important implications for RE in non-affiliated schools are the name change from 'Religious Instruction' (compare section 1.2 of this thesis) to 'Religious Education' and the reinterpretation of the Cowper-Temple clause from the 1870 Education Act. The name change has been interpreted as a conscious decision to emphasise the educational character of the subject, post-1988, reflecting the idea that RE was no longer to be seen as religious instruction, in the sense of *instructing* students *in* one religion such as the Christian faith, but as an educational practice, mainly concerned with the *study of* Christianity and other major religions (see Freathy & Parker, 2013; Jackson, 1990, 2000; Parsons, 1994). Furthermore, the Cowper-Temple clause, originally introduced in 1870 to prevent the teaching of religious catechisms or formularies *distinctive of any particular denomination* (1870 Education Act), was clarified in the 1988 ERA to say that 'this provision is not to be taken as prohibiting provision in such a syllabus for the study of such catechisms' (see ERA, SCH 1 section 9) (compare Jackson, 2000, 87). This distinction between a confessional practice such as Christian catechesis in Religious Instruction and the *study of* catechisms, e.g. from a non-confessional perspective, can be viewed as one example of what is legally impossible and possible in the non-affiliated context. Whilst instruction in a particular religious faith tradition is not possible, the study of this tradition is possible, as long as it is done in combination with the study of other religious traditions (present in the UK) and from a non-confessional methodological viewpoint.[15] (This interpretation can also be found in Hull 1989: *The Act Unpacked*, 4.)

To clarify: the present thesis argues that these categorical legal distinctions between the two sectors of school (with and without a religious affiliation) create circumstances in which Religious Education may differ profoundly in the two settings, although this theoretical differentiation may not always be reflected in practice. What is important to emphasise then is that the complex empirical reality of both school sectors, within which this distinction is not always easily recognisable, is *not* the subject of investigation in my thesis.

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[14] For more information, see Doney, J. forthcoming. *Unearthing Policies of Instrumentalization in English Religious Education Using Statement Archaeology*. Abingdon: Taylor and Francis.

[15] See chapter 3, section 3.1, for more information on how I define methodological insider/outsider perspectives in the context of confessional/non-confessional RE.

What I am focusing on instead are the theoretical discussions and presuppositions that led to the policies which sought a distinction in law between RE in one sector (the affiliated school) and RE in another sector (the unaffiliated school) and, more importantly, the extent to which these presuppositions might also relate to debates about the place of theology in some types of Religious Education. Therefore, my argument is based, primarily, on what appears to be legally possible and impossible in these different contexts (for example with regard to what can and cannot be taught – and how – in the two types of school), rather than on what actually occurs in practice, that is in 'reality', in both educational settings. For example, I am aware that my argument about possible disciplinary irreconcilabilities between confessional interpretations of theology and non-confessional RE would apply equally to RE in 'faith schools' that share the same non-confessional presuppositions, and it is possible to claim that these compatibility problems would instantly be resolved in religiously unaffiliated schools which, for whatever reason, contravene the Cowper-Temple clause and teach a RE that is based on belief. However, the key point I wish to make in this context is that, in contrast to RE in schools with a religious affiliation, there is no positive legal stipulation to justify the confessional basis of such provision in such a case. In fact, if one were to attempt to justify belief-based confessional RE in unaffiliated schools, it would be based mainly on what is *not* said in the law, rather than what is said, whereas explicit permission is given to affiliated schools to provide confessional RE.

For this reason, I propose the following argument: even though it is possible to reframe the compatibility problem between theology and RE as a 'type-of-RE' problem, rather than a 'type-of-school' problem (i.e. in the sense that it occurs only within a particular non-confessional type of RE which itself can occur in different institutional settings), it is important for the theorising undertaken in this thesis to be *sector-specific*. By this I mean that my theorising concentrates, specifically, on 'non-confessional RE' as a distinctive theoretical category which is legally associated with the non-affiliated sector and is characterised by certain features introduced in the Cowper-Temple clause – again, for this particular sector – such as the stipulation that this form of RE cannot be founded on certain catechisms or doctrines or presuppose belief on the part of the teacher or student. It is in this differentiated sense that I will use the term 'sector-specific theorising' in this thesis. This theorising addresses a particular non-confessional form of RE which (although occurring within and between different institutional settings) is clearly identified by the law as being specific to the non-affiliated sector and which therefore must take account of legal parameters governing this type of school and consider the logical possibilities and corollaries of those parameters. In other words, I am aware of the complex empirical reality of Religious Education in English schools in which the distinction between 'affiliated' and 'non-affiliated' is blurred, in which faith groups have statutory rights to determine RE in non-faith schools (e.g. reflected in the fact that, in England, SACRE consist of four groups: the Church of England, other religions and denominations, teachers and the LEA); in which the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC) has taken responsibility for RE in all schools (whether affiliated or not); and in which the characteristics of one sector can sometimes be found in the other, etc. But I will, nevertheless, use the term 'sector' in this thesis because my focus is on the current legal situation. In short, it is the sector as defined by a particular law: the Cowper-Temple clause.

One example of similar context-specific theorising, taking into account the legal framework of multi-faith RE in religiously unaffiliated schools, has been offered by Wanda Alberts in *Integrative Religious Education in Europe* (Alberts, 2007). Alberts defines 'integrative RE' as 'education about different religions in religiously mixed classrooms', which she contrasts with 'separative RE', taking place in educational settings where the students are 'separated according to the religious tradition they belong to and learn about "their own" and often also about "other" religions in separate groups' (see Alberts, 2010, 275-276). Although it is arguable that 'separative RE' is not an ideal term to use in the British context, e.g. because there are limitations on school admissions policies ensuring that not all students admitted to religiously affiliated schools can be admitted on religious grounds, which might make such schools less 'separative' than the category implies, it is nevertheless helpful to briefly consider her second category of integrative RE and the similarities it has with my (legally informed) view of non-confessional RE in religiously unaffiliated schools outlined above. As Alberts explains, the term 'integrative' has two dimensions in that it (i) refers to the 'non-separative educational framework', which takes religious plurality, both in schools or in society at large, as its starting point, thus requiring 'a concept for dealing with diversity in the classroom', specifically with respect to teaching about various religious traditions; and in that it (ii) makes religions the subject matter of RE, without taking the viewpoint of any of these traditions as an overall framework (Alberts, 2007, 1). It should be evident that there is a key link here between the second point and the wording of the Cowper-Temple Clause which clearly states that only the study of catechisms and doctrines of a particular religion is permissible in the non-affiliated sector (in which case the given religion is subject content), but not the teaching of them, e.g. from a confessional perspective (in which case the religion becomes framework). For these reasons, Albert's main argument is that, once the decision is made that RE is to be integrative, that is, designed as an obligatory subject which is attended by all children of a class together, regardless of individual religious/non-religious backgrounds (which has been the case with RE in non-affiliated schools in England and Wales since 1988), 'there need to be certain standards to ensure its *impartiality* so that it really serves the general educational task of the school and is not instrumentalized by any religious or anti-religious group (Alberts, 2010, 282-283, my emphasis). Therefore, Alberts stresses:

> 'There is no "middle way" between a secular and a religious approach to RE. If RE is to be integrative and obligatory, the aim of the subject cannot be to provide children with faith or spirituality, as this would necessarily promote particular religious traditions, prioritising them over other religious or secular views.' (Alberts, 2010, 284)

Liberal theological approaches to Religious Education, such as the various types of experiential RE considered in the previous section of this thesis, fall into the category of such attempted 'middle ways' between confessional/non-confessional approaches which become problematic if applied to the context of non-affiliated schools. Barnes and Wright claim, for example, that experiential RE reflects the values of Western liberal Protestantism, which simply makes them neo-confessional, rather than non-confessional or less confessional in any way (Barnes & Wright, 2006; compare sections 3.3 and 7.2). Furthermore, Alberts points out that a major complication is that experiential approaches (see, for example, Hay, 1986), 'attempting to guide the pupils on their way to the experience of the sacred', do so in a context (e.g. of plural classrooms embedded in a specific legal framework) 'where the existence of the sacred and positive value of experiencing it cannot be regarded as given (Alberts, 2010, 279; for more information, see Alberts, 2007, 137-141). It is in this sense that I frame the perceived compatibility problem between Theology and Religious Education, identifiable in the research literature of the subject (see sections 1.1 and 1.2) – it is a problem that only occurs between certain (confessional) types of theology and multi-faith RE in non-affiliated schools, due to the subject's context-specific need to remain impartial vis-á-vis certain ontological questions, including the question of whether God exists, as well as its need not to study multiple religions from any single religious or secular perspective.

However, in this context, it is important to stress again that my thesis does not aim to make any empirical claims about how much theology is actually 'taking place' in multi-faith RE in religiously unaffiliated schools or in which way theology is used and/or practised in such educational settings. Instead, my focus is on a theoretical problem, identified in the literature, between certain conceptualisations of theology, namely those conceptualisations that are *non*-specific to the sector of unaffiliated schools and the legal parameters governing those types of school (compare section 1.2). The reason why I have chosen to provide sector-specific theorising based on the legal parameters of the non-affiliated school is because, as my study will show (see in particular chapters 3, 5 and 6), too much of the current theology-embracing research literature, in the field of Religious Education, fails to recognise the contextual distinctiveness of non-confessional forms of RE in schools without a religious designation. It thus approaches theology, whether explicitly or implicitly, from some kind of 'insider' (Christian) perspective which is viewed either as adequate for or applicable to multi-faith RE in unaffiliated schools – examples considered in this thesis are: Cooling's Stapleford Project (1994); Copley et al.'s Biblos Project (2001); Strhan's Transcendence-focused interpretation of Theology (2010); the Church of England Office's Understanding Christianity project; Gearon's idea of a common Holy Ground (2014); and Chipperton et al.'s Systematic Approach to Theological Literacy (2016).

Another research area in which this lack of sector-specific theorising is evident is interreligious learning. Here, one could point to Bert Roebben's recent attempt to promote an approach to interreligious learning suitable for the European context (Roebben, 2016, 23). This approach is based on a view of Religious Education as having a 'narthical dimension' that offers students a place (like a narthex in a church building) in which they are free to theologise with like-minded people as well as those of other beliefs and worldviews in a safe space whose transcendent dimension connects and accommodates all (Roebben, 2016). This perspective on RE, it is arguable, cannot be easily reconciled with the legal parameters governing schools without a religious affiliation in England and Wales. For example (as I have argued elsewhere):

> 'Roebben's main argument that RE teachers should guide students in their search for meaningful answers to existential questions by creating an open space for personal theological reflection in the "face of the other" (53) – an approach born out of his application of Paul Tillich's concept of "ultimate concerns" (Tillich 1951, 1957) to the practice of RE (7, 55, 90, etc.) – presupposes a certain confessional motivation on the part of the subject, and RE teachers specifically, that may be considered inadequate or inappropriate for multi-faith RE in non-faith-school settings in England and Wales.' (Schmidt, 2020, 247)

This is a good example of why it is so important to take into account the type of Religious Education and the (e.g. national/educational/legal) context in which it takes place when assessing arguments for theology-centred RE. The type and context of RE considered here is non-confessional, multi-faith RE in the unaffiliated school which, due to the legal parameters in which it takes place, should meet certain criteria such as being non-confessional; impartial vis-à-vis religious truth claims and certain ontological questions (such as whether God exists); tolerant of a plurality of perspectives; as well as being neither faith-based nor faith-requiring nor faith-promoting in any way (compare section 1.2). However, if we attempt to integrate in this particular form of RE an approach to theology that has a confessional element (e.g. in that it contradicts one or more of those characteristics (in Roebben's case, perhaps, the characteristic of required impartiality about ontological questions of the reality of God's existence), then we are faced with a compatibility problem which would not necessarily exist in a different type of RE and educational context such as, say, denominational Religious Education in an Anglican school. In other words, for theology and RE to be compatible with one another in any context, there needs to be an alignment between the given type of Religious Education considered and the type of theology promoted. One way to enable God-centred, interreligious learning to take place in multi-faith RE in schools without a religious affiliation without issues of incompatibility, I will argue in this thesis (in chapters 5 and 6 in particular), is to promote a theologically orientated approach to the study of *different* religions, specifically designed for the context of the unaffiliated school and undertaken from a non-confessional perspective. As explained above, I regard the theorising carried out for this purpose to be sector-specific in the sense that it is legally associated with the sector of the unaffiliated school and seeks to take proper account of the legal parameters, policies and practices associated with it.

## 1.4 Research Focus

Broadly speaking, this study focuses on the place of theology and the status of theological curriculum content in the study of religions in the context of multi-faith Religious Education. More specifically, it concentrates on the potential role(s) that developing a theological understanding or theological understandings – for reasons to be explained below, defined here primarily (but not exclusively so) as *understanding(s) of theological content* – may play in enabling students to become religiously literate in relation to theistic religions in non-confessional, multi-faith Religious Education as it is taught in primary and secondary schools without a religious affiliation in England and Wales today. Unless otherwise specified, I therefore use the term 'RE' to refer to non-confessional RE as it is commonly understood in the context of religiously unaffiliated schools[16]. Wherever reference is made to schools that possess a religious affiliation, this is made explicit, either by using the umbrella term 'faith schools' or by specifying concrete religious and/or denominational associations.

However, without wanting to dive too deeply into the complex philosophical argument to be developed in this thesis, I need to specify here that, in contrast to confessionally motivated God-centred approaches such as Copley's (2005), my choice of a research focus on theology/theological understanding(s) is the result of a particular view of religion(s) – adopted by me in combination with other conceptions (see chapters 5 and 6) – which could theoretically be applied to non-theistic religions as well. What I mean by this is an existentially orientated, life-centred view of what it means to be religious for religious believers, which I base (again, for reasons to be explained below) on the idea of what I refer to as the 'centrality of transcendence' in religious belief. This means I see transcendence (defined here very broadly as any experience interpreted by the experiencing subject to go beyond the normal or physical level of human existence) as an important area of research in the study of religion(s). A central example would be human concerns for so called 'ultimate questions', e.g. of the meanings of life and death.

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[16] As argued in section 1.3 of this chapter, at present, RE exists in the following legal framework: the National Curriculum states three legal requirements that all state-maintained schools must fulfil, of which the first two apply to all subjects alike and the final one is RE-specific: first, schools need to 'promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils'. Second, they must prepare them at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life'. And third, they are obliged to 'teach Religious Education' (see page 5 of *The National Curriculum in England – Framework Document*, published by the Department for Education, DfE, in 2014). In other words, RE is a compulsory subject in the curriculum of state-maintained schools that all students must attend from age 5 to 18 – with the exception of those withdrawn by their parents. (Other schools such as academies and free schools are required through the terms of their funding agreement to provide Religious Education.) The RE curriculum, in turn, is determined, locally, by the Agreed Syllabus Conference and Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education of the given region, which is responsible for the production of the locally agreed syllabus for RE. It is a legal requirement, set out in the Education Reform Act 1988: Religious Education and Collective Worship, that all local authority RE agreed syllabuses used in maintained schools (and RE syllabuses used in academies) must 'reflect the fact that religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, whilst taking account of the teaching practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain' (ERA, 1988, 6). (For more detailed information, see also Clarke & Woodhead's *A New Settlement: Religion and Belief in Schools* (2015, in particular sections 3 and 5)).

I am aware that such an idea of transcendence could be explored not just in relation to religious traditions and worldviews that see God, or the divine more generally, as the source of all transcendent experience, but also to non-theistic belief systems (e.g. Theravada Buddhism) and possibly even to non-religious worldviews such as Humanism, Marxism, etc. Moreover, I recognise that Theology is not the only discipline through which explorations of that which is seen as transcendent in each religious tradition or worldview can take place and that other disciplines including History, Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, etc. provide equally valuable focal points and methods for investigation, which – in the case of non-theistic/non-religious belief systems, for instance – can sometimes even be more appropriate. Yet, given that my thesis has a particular interest in the study of theistic belief(s) in schools and the question of adequate representation of theistic traditions, I have chosen the slightly narrower research focus on theology/theological understanding(s) here.

This decision was justified by the following argument: ideas of transcendence are a central aspect of religions and worldviews, found in theistic, non-theistic as well as non-religious belief systems, and should therefore be an important focal point in the study of religions and worldviews in schools. Ideas of transcendence can be explored through a wide range of disciplines and methodological approaches. In the case of theistic religions, however, such a methodological transcendence-orientation would result in choosing a theology-centred approach to studying these traditions because, in these contexts, the transcendent is closely related to (and sometimes even equated with) the divine, and theology, in turn, concerns itself with a systematic study of concepts, teachings and practices relating to belief in God/the divine (*theos*). Therefore, my thesis concentrates, specifically, on the promotion of a theologically orientated focus in the study of theistic religions, chosen for the particular purpose of developing students' theological understanding(s) in multi-faith RE in religiously unaffiliated schools.

As indicated in section 1.1, I include in this consideration all monotheistic and polytheistic religions studied in multi-faith Religious Education in England and Wales. These are the three Abrahamic monotheisms, Judaism, Christianity and Islam; the Asian monotheism of Sikhism; as well as all Hindu polytheistic traditions. Even though an argument could be made for an extension of this research focus to the devotional branches of Mahayana Buddhism or even Theravada traditions (e.g. if we interpreted '*theos*' not as God or any other idea of the divine, but as a 'supremely valuable state' towards which all religions are orientated; see Ward, 2003, 276), I limit this research to the less controversial choice of the monotheistic and polytheistic traditions listed above.

This selection, in turn, is based on the following rather broad view of theism which I adopt in this study: I define theism as a belief system whose followers hold beliefs in the existence of *theos*, commonly translated as 'god', and include in this term any notion of the divine such as God, gods and/or deities, or any other type of ultimate reality (e.g. *theos* understood as a fundamental, impersonal principle). I therefore count five of the six major religions studied in RE as theistic religions or at least as traditions possessing theistic aspects, irrespective of whether there are differences (e.g. Abrahamic monotheism; non-Abrahamic monotheism; polytheism, etc.) in their corresponding interpretations of the divine. This does not mean that religious differences in the conceptualisation of *theos* are irrelevant to understanding the given traditions and various individual branches of them. In fact, one reason why I will also promote a method of interreligious comparison in the study of theistic belief(s) in schools is to provide students with the required means to discover areas of overlap and differences in conceptions of the divine found in these traditions, and to enable them, in this way, to identify potential (e.g. conceptual/doctrinal) links between the theological content they study, not just within a particular faith tradition (as Christian Systematic Theology would do, for example), but also across religious boundaries. (Examples of conceptions of God and corresponding theistic schools, both in Western and

Asian philosophy, which could be taken into account when choosing an interreligious, theologically orientated focus in RE, can be found in Oppy, 2013 and Dasti, 2013[17].)

And finally (as also mentioned above), this study is a personal response to the realisation, based on my review of relevant literature, that nowadays in multi-faith RE only little emphasis seems to be put on exploring the theological dimension(s) of religion(s) with students, e.g. in the form of providing a systematic (and potentially, comparative) study of key concepts, doctrines and practices relating to belief in God, gods or ultimate reality in different theistic religions (see Conroy, 2016; Conroy et al., 2013; Cooling, 1994b, 2010; Copley, 2005; Hull, 1975c, 1975d, 2004; Ipgrave, 2009; Teece, 2005, 2008, 2010a). One of the main reasons for this development reported in the literature, as this study will argue, is that, for many researchers and practitioners of RE, furthering theological understanding is no longer seen as an important or even appropriate aim for RE as it is believed to involve the risk of (Christian) indoctrination, which – so they claim – makes the study of theological content, and even more so, theological practice, irreconcilable with non-confessional Religious Education in secular educational settings such as schools without a religious affiliation (for a recent example of this view, see Brine, 2016a, 2016b also discussed in section 5.1). To counter this argument, the present study attempts to provide an interpretive framework for the systematic study of theological content of theistic religions, designed specifically for the purpose of overcoming this (perceived) compatibility problem that is thought to exist between the (assumed) confessionalism of theological approaches and multi-faith Religious Education in religiously unaffiliated schools. For this, I will also advocate a method of 'careful' interreligious comparison, enabling students to consider theistic belief across religious boundaries by comparing and contrasting key theological concepts and doctrines in different theistic religions. I use the term 'careful comparison' here to point to the fact that such acts of comparison and differentiation should only take place in RE if the given methodological approach(es) is/are capable of balancing issues of universality and particularity[18] in the study of religions – another task this study seeks to achieve. This is in order to separate my usage of Comparative Religion from the problematic ways in which this practice has often been interpreted in the broader field of Religious Studies in the past. Thus, I will show that typical criticisms brought against comparative methods, such as the risk of inviting essentialism and cultural/religious relativism into the study of religions, are contingent, not necessary, and can therefore be avoided in the present proposition.

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[17] Drawing on Oppy's presentation of Western currents of thought in the Routledge Companion to Theism (Taliaferro, Harrison, & Goetz, Eds., 2013), I see five main conceptualisations of God/theos as central to Western theism. The first set of ideas stresses that God's transcendence or otherness is beyond human comprehension, thus placing 'severe limitations on what we can know (…) about the intrinsic nature of God' (Oppy, 2013, 20). Some versions of this type of thinking assert that there is nothing 'positive' we can say about the nature of God (humans can only grasp what God's intrinsic nature is not). On other versions, while no literal knowledge about God can be gained by humans, there are metaphors, figures or illusions which have 'some value as items of knowledge or assertion'. And yet other versions of theist thought accept not even these items of knowledge or assertion as epistemological grounds (Oppy, 2013, 20). The second current of thought in Western theism centres upon the idea that 'access to God requires some kind of mystical experience or illumination, or, at any rate, some kind of religious experience'. Such ideas are often expressed through claims about the 'ineffability and incommunicability' of the type of knowledge 'acquired by way of mystical experience' (Oppy, 2013, 20). The third set of beliefs is based on the idea that 'God is the fundamental principle, or ground, or source of (more or less) everything else (Oppy, 2013, 20). This conception of God finds expression in pagan philosophy in Aristotle's idea of the Prime Mover, for instance. The fourth current of thought works with a conception of God found in the Middle Ages and characterises God, for example, as 'simple, eternal, unchanging, infinite, indestructible, necessarily existing', etc. And the fifth and final conception sees God as an agent or person. This view, however, is often criticised for being anthropomorphic by proponents of other conceptions (Oppy, 2013, 20-21).

Moreover, to reflect the great variety of conceptions of God in Asian philosophy, one might first point to the wide range of Sanskrit terms denoting the divine in Asian traditions including *brahman* (ultimate reality); *isvara* (controller); *bhagavan* (blessed one); *parama-atman* (supreme self); etc. and, second, specify that many (polytheistic) Indian traditions also speak of gods/deities of a lesser status. These deities may or may not have personal attributes and are often ascribed high-level cognitive abilities, influence over the cosmos and openness to sacrificial offerings (Dasti, 2013). The Vedas (foundational texts of many Indian traditions, c. 1,500 BCE), although primarily concerned with ritual acts, not theology, include philosophical reflections on theism such as speculations about the 'All-maker' (see Rig 10.82) (Dasti, 2013, 24). However, more elaborate theistic reflection can be found in later scriptures such as the Upanisads (c. 800-300 BCE) – a series of mystic/philosophical texts appended to different Vedas – and the Bhagavad-gita (c. 200 BCE), a book of epic poems recounting the teachings of Krishna. If we limit our focus on understandings of *brahman* within Hinduism, for example, we will see that a great variety of interpretations of this one term is developed in the different scriptures (see, for example, monist versus personalist views of *brahman* in the Upanisads) and that there are also various ways of conceptualising this idea of ultimate reality. Thus, one can look at *brahman* as a metaphysical concept, as an ontological concept, but also as an axiological, teleological or soteriological concept, depending on what text, text passage or schools of thought one takes as a basis.

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[18] This thesis operates with a simple definition of particularity and universality in the contexts of religion(s) and the study of religion(s). Particularity is understood here as a quality that is specific or unique to an object/phenomenon in the world or a group of people. Focusing on the particularities of individual religious traditions, for instance, means concentrating on that which is specific or special about them and makes them distinct from other traditions. A focus on the particularities of religious traditions can thus bring out differences in belief, value and practice that exist both within and between religions. Universality, by contrast, is defined here as a quality that is shared by several objects/phenomena in the world or groups of people. To begin with, approaching the study of religion(s) through a universalist lens or method of investigation may shed light on that which religions have in common or makes them alike in certain (important) respects, e.g. in terms of their values and principles, myths and narratives, beliefs and practices, organisational structures, etc. Another way of interpreting 'universality', in this context, is to think of it as a quality which is thought to be true in or adequate/appropriate, for all situations and (e.g. cultural/religious) contexts. For example, ethical pluralists such as Knitter (1995, 1996), Küng (1993; Küng & Kuschel, Eds., 1996) or Ruland (2002) promote a universalist view of religions, based on what is sometimes called 'global ethics projects', that sees ethical principles such as love and compassion as a common denominator and/or the true core of all religious traditions, in short, fundamental human values that are not relative to culture. (Issues of particularity/universality will be considered more closely in chapter 7.)

## 1.5 Research Questions and Hypotheses

As explained above, the present study is a response to the argument found in the literature that in RE practice today, only little emphasis is put on exploring the theological dimensions of theistic religions – a pedagogical trend, which is sometimes described as the 'marginalisation of theology' in Religious Education which arguably began in the mid- to late 1960s and is believed to have led to a general suspicion of theological methods and a neglect of theological curriculum content in multi-faith RE (Conroy, 2016; Conroy et al., 2013; Cooling, 1994b, 2010; Copley, 2005; Hull, 1975c, 1975d, 2004; Ipgrave, 2009; Teece, 2005, 2008, 2010a). This study sees this reported trend as a negative development, possibly leading to a misrepresentation of theistic religions in the classroom and therefore aims at re-establishing, by means of sector-specific philosophical debate and reasoning, theological content as a legitimate and important focal point in non-confessional, multi-faith RE (in schools without a religious affiliation in England and Wales). To achieve this overall research goal, the study seeks to answer five main research questions:

(i) What is the relationship between non-confessional Religious Education and Theology when the latter is used in the context of RE and how does it reflect the historical development of the disciplinary relationships and tensions between Religious Studies and Theology at a more general academic level?

(ii) In what ways might gaining a theological understanding or theological understandings of theistic religions (e.g. gained through the study of theological curriculum content such as key concepts, teachings and practices relating to belief in the divine) contribute to becoming religiously literate – specifically, in relation to monotheistic and polytheistic religions – in and through RE?

(iii) To what extent are existing theology-centred approaches to the study of religions in Religious Education compatible or incompatible with the principles and values of non-confessional, multi-faith RE? What are their limitations in this respect?

(iv) Which conditions would an alternative theologically orientated approach need to fulfil to overcome the potential limitations of other approaches and thus be more suitable for the context of non-confessional, multi-faith RE as it is found in schools without a religious affiliation?

(v) And: what interpretive framework could be used to promote such a theologically orientated approach to the study of theistic religions in schools, designed specifically for the context of non-confessional, multi-faith RE in religiously unaffiliated schools?

This philosophical investigation is based on two hypotheses – a 'foundational' one revealing an unstated premise in my overall argument for a stronger God-centred focus in the study of theistic religions in non-confessional RE and an 'emerging' one, evolving out of the critical analysis and review of relevant literature undertaken in the present study. The **first hypothesis**, which also serves as a justification for the choice of my overall research focus (theological understandings in Religious Education) can be summarised as follows:

- There is no doubt that belief[19] in God (or the divine, more generally) is the defining feature[20] of theistic religions and hence, an important aspect to consider when studying them (see definition of theism in section 1.4). Theology is concerned with a systematic study of concepts, teachings, beliefs and practices relating to God, the learning outcome of which could be called 'theological understanding'. Developing a theological understanding or understandings of the monotheistic and polytheistic religions studied in RE, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism (by focusing on their respective key theological concepts, doctrines as well as God-related beliefs and practices) therefore plays an important role in becoming religiously literate in relation to these traditions. (**Hypothesis 1**)

The **second hypothesis**, emerging mainly from my continuous review of relevant literature in chapters 1, 3 and 5 hopes to offer a theoretical basis for answering questions (iii)-(v) above and can be formulated in the following way:

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[19] Note that my use of the term 'belief' in this hypothesis includes many interpretations, ranging from cognitive belief in the existence of God to a more existential orientation towards the divine and/or way of life directed towards that presence. (See chapter 6 for more detailed information.)

[20] The present study recognises the possibility that some religious adherents, although identifying themselves with a theistic religious tradition, may (at a personal level) not believe in God, gods/deities or any other type of ultimate reality and that there are also whole branches within theistic traditions for which theistic belief is not a central focal point or faith requirement (e.g. liberal Quakerism in Christianity). However, given that my research focus is, specifically, on belief in God/the divine and theism, I do not consider it necessary to include such a differentiation in my working definition of theism here. (For a more detailed exploration of the idea of 'God-centredness' in theistic faith, see chapter 6.)

- An apparent compatibility problem is currently shaping discussions about the relationship between theology and non-confessional Religious Education as it is often assumed that using theological methods and focusing on theological content in the classroom involves the risk of religious (usually, Christian) indoctrination and is hence, not adequate for secular educational settings such as schools without a religious affiliation (see Smart, 1983; Netto, 1989 and Brine 2016a; 2016b). This problem, however, can be solved by defining theology mainly in terms of its objects of study (rather than methods) and applying the resulting theologically orientated approach – aimed at furthering students' understanding(s) of theological content – to all theistic traditions considered in RE, without adopting an insider's perspective on any one of them. (**Hypothesis 2**)

The present study therefore seeks to introduce an interpretive framework designed to promote understanding(s) of key theological concepts and teachings as well as beliefs and practices relating to God – applied to different theistic religions and, in each case, undertaken from a non-confessional viewpoint of 'learning about' the theological dimension of the given tradition (see Grimmitt, 1973; Grimmitt & Read, 1977) – in other words, an academic, outsider's[21] view of religion that allows for a systematic study of theistic belief(s) across religious boundaries, thus also possessing the potential for interreligious comparison.

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[21] Note that, although my introduction makes use of the terms 'insider'/'outsider' in the context of religion, I do not wish to imply that simple binary oppositions, ignoring the fluidity and potential overlap of both categories, are helpful to debates about Religious Education or the study of religion, in general. For a more nuanced discussion and, in fact, criticism of this dichotomy, see chapter 4, section 4.1.

## 1.6 Overall Research Aim and Individual Research Objectives

It is my intention to argue this case for a stronger focus on theological content in multi-faith Religious Education by focusing on the following five individual research objectives, derived from the key questions listed in section 1.5:

(i) To examine the disciplinary relationship between Theology and non-confessional, multi-faith Religious Education (as well as Religious Studies, more broadly) and to assess, in particular, the validity of the argument that the task of promoting theological understanding(s) – in the variety of ways in which it can be understood – and the values of non-confessional RE are incompatible with each other

(ii) To explore the potential role(s) a theologically orientated approach to RE, focused on the study of key theological content of different theistic religions, could play in developing students' religious literacy (in relation to theistic religions) as a broader aim of RE

(iii) To assess the extent to which already existing, theology-centred approaches can be evaluated as suitable for the context of non-confessional, multifaith RE and, if relevant and possible, identify areas in which they would need to be modified or further developed to overcome potential limitations

(iv) To identify the conditions an alternative theologically orientated approach needs to fulfil to overcome potential limitations of other approaches and thus be compatible with the principles and values of non-confessional, multi-faith RE as it is found in schools without a religious affiliation

(v) And to provide an interpretive framework, including criteria for its successful use in RE, for furthering students' theological understanding(s) – here: of theological content such as concepts, teachings and practices relating to the divine – in different theistic religions, which overcomes the (apparent) compatibility problem.

The main examples[22] of existing theology-centred approaches I will consider in this study are Trevor Cooling's concept-cracking strategy (Cooling, 1994a, 2000, 2010); Geoff Teece's soteriological framework[23] for the study of religions in RE (Teece, 2008, 2010b, 2012); and Esther Reed and Rob Freathy's narrative approach to theology in Religious Education

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[22] Note that the particular choice of these examples will be justified in chapter 2, see inclusion/exclusion criteria in section 2.4.

[23] Teece's soteriological framework for RE is what I would call a 'trans-religious' approach, applicable to non-theistic and theistic religions. As I will explain in more detail in chapters 3 and 6, however, I use Teece as an example of a theology-centred approach as his soteriological framework can be used for an interreligious study of theological concepts and doctrines if one limits one's investigation to theistic religions (as I do in this thesis).

(Freathy et al., 2014; Reed, Freathy, Cornwall, & Davis, 2013). The outcome, I hope, will be my provision of a theoretical justification as well as some practical means (i.e. in the form of subject-specific criteria) to re-establish theological content as a legitimate and important focal point in the study of theistic religions in schools without a religious affiliation, which is also the overall aim of this study.

One obvious research limitation which is important to mention in this context is the fact that my work is entirely non-empirical, which means that I am not able to test the validity of the theory I put forward in practice in the same way as empirical results would be evaluated. This, however, does not mean that there are no assessment criteria for the validity of theoretical arguments like mine. In fact, two main types of criteria should be taken into account here: internal and external ones. *Internal criteria* by which the quality of this thesis can be measured are, for example, linguistic clarity; internal logical coherence of individual arguments as well as their consistency with one another; achievement of overall aims and individual research objectives, etc. But there are also *external criteria* such as coherence with and relevance to other discourses (both recent and/or past) in the field of Religious Education; correspondence with practice/policy (e.g. as found in official policy documents, non-statutory guidelines and frameworks, or even as described by other RE researchers). However, the closest direct link to classroom practice I intend to make in this study is the recommendation of a potential practical application of the interreligious approach to theology which I develop in chapters 5 and 6 and the formulation of success criteria for using it, most constructively, in the classroom (see chapter 8).

## 1.7 Contributions to Knowledge

To be able to explain the specific ways in which my study seeks to form an original contribution to knowledge in the subject area of Religious Education and the Philosophy of Religious Education in particular, I need to provide a brief overview on the main gaps in research the literature review carried out in this thesis identifies and explain how my own study responds to these issues. From the discussion of theoretical developments in RE included in section 1.2, we may draw two main conclusions about the current role and status of theology in Religious Education. First, according to key figures in the debate about the place of theology in RE, the shift from confessional (e.g. liberal theological) Christian Instruction to non-confessional, multi-faith Religious Education which occurred in the late 1960s also correlated with an increasing scepticism towards, if not rejection of, the use of theological methods in RE teaching. In this intellectual climate, confessional RI, including its interest in theological methods and curriculum content, was seen as involving the risk of indoctrination and was hence judged to be irreconcilable with the new non-confessional goal of studying both religious and non-religious worldviews from an academic outsider's perspective. Some researchers have argued that these theoretical developments in RE have led to a gradual marginalisation of theology in RE – both RE theories and practices – which continues to this day (see Conroy, 2016; Cooling, 2010; Copley, 2005; Ipgrave, 2009; Moulin, 2015). However, a growing body of research (see Cooling, 1994b, 2010; Copley, 2005; Freathy and Davis, 2019; Freathy & Parker, 2013; Hull, 1975a, 1975c, 1984; Parsons, 1994) suggests that the theoretical justification for this (perceived) development – in particular, the assumption that promoting a theological focus in RE is inappropriate for secular educational settings such as schools without a religious affiliation because it impedes the non-confessional endeavour to study religions academically/impartially – is at least questionable.

Second, scholars and practitioners of RE who have recently questioned this hypothesis, either explicitly or implicitly, in their works, thereby embracing the possibility that using the resources of theology may be perfectly compatible with the demands of non-confessional, multi-faith RE are: Cooling, (1994b, 2000, 2010); Copley, (2005); Teece, (2005, 2008, 2010a); Ipgrave (2009); Reed, Freathy, Cornwall and Davis, (2013); Freathy, Reed, and Davis, (2014); Chipperton, Georgiou, and Wright (2016); Conroy, (2016); and most recently, Freathy and Davis (2019). Yet, what has not been sufficiently explored in past and current research in the field of Religious Education is whether or not, and if so, on what argumentative grounds, this theory is tenable – by clarifying, for instance, what conditions theological approaches to multi-faith RE would have to meet to be deemed adequate for secular educational settings such as schools without a religious affiliation. Clarifying this issue, by means of critical analysis of relevant literature and philosophical argumentation is one contribution the present study seeks to make.

Moreover, as chapter 3 will reveal, a number of theology-centred approaches to the study of religions in schools have been proposed by Religious Education professionals/researchers despite the rather negative image of theology in multi-faith RE, identified in the specialist literature of the subject. For reasons explained in my methodology chapter (see inclusion criteria for theology-centred approaches to Religious Education in section 2.4), the ones considered most thoroughly in this study are: Cooling's concept-cracking strategy (Cooling, 1994a, 1996, 2000, 2010); Teece's soteriological framework for RE (Teece, 2008, 2010b, 2012) and Reed and Freathy's Narrative Theology (Freathy et al., 2014; Reed et al., 2013), the latter of which is also used as one methodological component in Freathy et al.'s interdisciplinary, multi-methodological RE-searchers model for the study of religions in RE (G. Freathy, R. Freathy, Doney, Walshe, & Teece, 2015; R. Freathy & G. Freathy, 2013a, 2013b). However, it is not clear to what extent these theology-centred approaches can be said to be adequate responses to the perceived compatibility problem identified above. One intention of Chapter 3 is therefore to contribute to a better understanding of the benefits and shortcomings of these approaches – in relation to the task of promoting a stronger theologically orientated focus in RE, suitable for the non-confessional and multi-faith-focused nature of the subject.

Another reason, to be explored in chapter 4, why this study is particularly important today is that current literacy-focused propositions for RE pay little attention to the role theological understanding(s) may play in developing religious literacy as a broader aim of RE. There are numerous recent reports that stress the significance of furthering students' religious literacy, especially in multi-faith RE in schools without a religious affiliation, and which see this as a primary subject aim today. The most prominent examples to name here are *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward – A National Plan for RE* already discussed in section 1.3 (Commission on Religious Education, 2018); Understanding Christianity (introduced by the Church of England Education Office in 2016); *Improving Religious Literacy* (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education, 2016); *Living with Difference: Community, Diversity and the Common Good* (Commission on Religion and Belief in British

Public Life, 2015); *RE for REal: The Future of Teaching and Learning about Religion and Belief* (Dinham & Shaw, 2015); and *A New Settlement: Religion & Belief in Schools* (Clarke & Woodhead, 2015). However, what has not been investigated in this context so far is to what extent it is necessary to develop understanding(s) of the theological dimension(s) of religions, especially with regard to the aim of becoming religiously literate in relation to theistic religions in RE.

And finally, as chapters 5 and 6 will show, in developing my own interpretive framework for an interreligious approach to exploring theological content in RE, designed for the context of non-confessional, multi-faith Religious Education for the specific purpose of overcoming the apparent compatibility problem described above, I aspire to make a helpful contribution to the field of theoretical research in RE. The solution I propose is original because, to this day, no explicitly interreligious (and potentially, comparative) vision of theology and interpretation of theological understanding(s) has been articulated within the context of non-confessional multi-faith RE. Thus, I will show in chapters 3 and 5, most theology-centred approaches influential in this field either come from within Christianity and are hence, most suitable for corresponding (i.e. denominational) faith-school settings (e.g. Chipperton et al., 2016) or focus on Christianity, but claim to be applicable to other religious traditions as well (e.g. Cooling's Stapleford Project). However, neither type of response, it is arguable, does justice to the subject's sector-specific need for (not only ideological, but also methodological) impartiality and respect for religious diversity in teaching about the principal religions present in the UK.

To summarise: in this chapter, I introduced the topic explored in this thesis – theological understanding(s) in multi-faith RE (section 1.1); provided a background to the study focused on common theoretical justifications for the perceived marginalisation of theology in RE (section 1.2); discussed the contextual distinctiveness of the unaffiliated school with regard to the legal parameters governing the teaching of RE in this sector (1.3); described my research focus and research limitations (1.4); identified five research questions and two (foundational/emergent) hypotheses (1.5) as well as my overall research aim and five individual research objectives, derived from the research questions (1.6) and explained, finally, how this research seeks to make a contribution to its fields of study (1.7). The next chapter will be concerned with presenting and justifying my chosen methodology for this theoretical research project, reflecting as well on the role(s) theory may play in educational research and the difficulties one faces when trying to formulate a research methodology for a theoretical educational research such as mine.

# 2 Methods and Methodological Considerations

In this chapter, I will first engage in the challenging task of providing some insights into the methodological considerations, questions and problems I see involved in the process of writing a purely theoretical, philosophical study in Education (such as mine) and then present the methods I used in this project. The structure will be as follows: section 2.1 begins by looking at some of the factors that make writing a methodology within theoretical educational research, arguably, more complicated (i.e. in terms of the questions of what to include and how to structure it) than it would be in the case of empirical research such as traditional Social Science studies. This also includes a brief consideration of the relationship between theoretical and empirical research as understood in the present study. The two subsequent sections, 2.2 and 2.3, will then look at the meaning and status of method(s) in the context of Philosophy of Education – focusing specifically on what will have been defined as *(sector-specific) semi-autonomous theorising in a process of dialogic philosophical argumentation* by then – and second, examine some of the problems educational theorists like myself typically face when trying to formulate their own research methods. And finally, section 2.4 will explain how I went about researching my chosen topic (theological understanding in the context of multi-faith RE) in the style of, but not complete commitment to, the rules and principles of Systematic Research Methods (SRM).

Before going into any more detail, however, I think it is necessary to provide brief explanations of the two key terms used in this chapter: 'methods' and 'methodology'. A useful definition that draws a clear distinction between these terms has been offered by Sandra Harding (1987). According to her, 'method' refers to the tools and techniques used by researchers to gather, collect and organise evidence or 'data' as it is commonly called in the context of empirical studies. It is important to realise, though, that different disciplines have different ideas of what counts as evidence and therefore often use different methods for collecting their data. The term 'methodology', by contrast, has a less practical orientation as it refers to theories about the ways research should be conducted and how evidence must be collected. In other words, the focal points of methodologies tend to be more normative in comparison to that of methods because methodologies aim to provide the theoretical framework within which the methods employed can be justified. In this context, Harding also draws our attention to the ways in which methodology relates to the more abstract realm of epistemology – the branch of Philosophy investigating the origin, nature and limits of human knowledge. Dealing with questions relating to both this abstract realm of epistemology (asking how, and on the basis of which authority, claims to knowledge are justified) and the more practice-orientated realm of methods (concerned with data collection), methodology is like a 'bridge' between these two dimensions of the human quest for knowledge (Harding, 1987). Keeping these distinctions in mind, we may now examine some of the complications which I believe are involved in writing a methodology for purely theoretical research in the field of Education.

## 2.1 Theory in Educational Research and its Relation to Empirical Research Methods

This is a theoretical, philosophical work in the academic field of Education and Religious Education in particular. It is also interdisciplinary as it draws upon aspects of a variety of disciplines, mainly in the Humanities spectrum, such as Religious Studies, Theology, Philosophy and specifically, Philosophy of Religion, but also Philosophy of Education. The best way to summarise all of these aspects in one term is to say that this research work focuses on the *Philosophy of Religious Education* – defined here as an engagement with theoretical, philosophical questions to do with teaching and learning in non-confessional, multi-faith RE in schools without a religious affiliation. This, in turn, means that the present study bridges, at least in its choice of a research focus and resulting content selection, the Education/Humanities divide that exists in the departmental structure of higher-education (HE) institutions. However, as a research thesis written for the award of PhD at a British university, its structure and content must also follow the regulations of the department or departments in which it is located. In the case of this study, the supervisory responsibility lies solely in the Education department (that is, not in collaboration with Theology, Religious Studies or Philosophy, for instance) which belongs to the College of Social Sciences and International Studies as is typical of this academic context (UK). From my perspective, these two rather contrary factors – the theoretical, interdisciplinary nature of my study, focusing strongly on philosophical questions in the study of religions, versus its practical location in the Social Sciences – make writing a good methodology chapter a rather challenging task to complete.

This latter issue, I should clarify, though, is not specific to the subject area of Religious Education and is also unrelated to the type of research (i.e. theoretical/empirical) concerned. All subject-specific pedagogical research could be said to sit somewhat awkwardly, if not 'betwixt and between', Education as a broader research/disciplinary field and the given narrower academic focal point. The same applies to educational research in other Humanities subjects such as History, Geography, Psychology; STEM[24] subjects such as Science and Mathematics; but also, Modern Foreign Languages; Art and Design; Music, etc. The reason why I point to the issue of departmental locality of a research project like mine – stretching between Humanities and Social Sciences/Education by concentrating on the study of religions (RS focus) in schools (Education focus), is that I think it raises the important question of whether subject/disciplinary boundaries, reflected in the departmental structure of HE institutions, are at all 'real' and fixed, or (as I tend to believe) whether fundamental rethinking, e.g. beyond the traditional paradigm of interdisciplinary collaboration, may be required today.

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[24] This acronym stands for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

Another complication this study faces can be found in the fact that research in the Social Sciences, especially in UK/US contexts, is shaped by a strong emphasis on empirical, scientific investigation, which has arguably led to a trend in educational research to concentrate to a large degree on observation-driven, closed questions such as 'what works' and 'what doesn't' in education practice today (Biesta, Allan, & Edwards, 2011; Bridges & Smith, 2006; Farnsworth & Solomon, 2013; Ruitenberg, 2009b, 2009a). One might therefore argue that non-empirical work like the one I propose in this study finds itself in a situation where it needs to comply with parameters of writing and presenting research (including the obligation of determining methodological choices early on in the research process) that may not always be useful to the development of the given project. David Bridges and Richard Smith interpret the tendency among British educational researchers to embrace 'evidence-based' investigation techniques, e.g. in the style and format of controlled, randomised medical trials, and stay away from work that is founded on 'hunch or ideology', respectively, as a direct result of seeing Education as a Social Science, dedicated to the ideals of 'empiricism and experimentalism' (Bridges & Smith, 2006, 132). Although this description is probably a bit simplistic as it does not take into account other influencing factors such as requirements of funding councils and the Research Excellence Framework (REF), for instance, I think their appeal for more theoretical research in Education, independent in format and structure from empirical studies, is an important one.

Interestingly, as Bridges and Smith also explain, the situation of educational research is different in some Continental European countries. The German language, for instance, does not draw the same, hard line between scientific and non-scientific approaches as it speaks of two forms of sciences or *Wissenschaften* derived from the verb '*wissen*' (to know), one that concerns itself with the 'ways of knowing the natural world' – *Naturwissenschaften*; and one that concerns itself with the 'ways of knowing the human mind or spirit' – *Geisteswissenschaften*. In other words, rather than speaking of the 'Social Sciences' to stress their close relatedness to empirical science, the German language uses the independent expression of a *wissenschaftliche Erforschung des Geistes* (a scientific investigation of the mind/spirit), which – linguistically at least – is on a par with the natural sciences. However, since the idea of *Geisteswissenschaften* does not exist in English and is commonly translated as the humanistic study of culture, or simply as Humanities (that is, without this in-built reference to the potential equality of different types of inquiry), research in this category may easily appear to be fundamentally different from, and perhaps scientifically less valuable than, work in the natural sciences. For this reason, Bridges and Smith hint at the possibility that 'the influence of the scientific paradigm' within British/American educational research may ultimately be 'an accident of history and of the English language' (Bridges & Smith, 2006, 132). Again, one might question the validity of this argument by pointing out that varying (e.g. national) conceptualisations of education may also be the product of different onto-epistemological assumptions in wider culture. Yet, even if it is not true that the idea, reflected in educational research today, that it is mainly empirical science that 'supplies the model to which all claims of knowledge should aspire' is based on such a potential misconception of the term 'science' (Bridges & Smith, 2006, 132), it can nevertheless be questioned to what extent popular dichotomies within discussions of theory, e.g. between theory and practice or the theoretical and the empirical, are at all helpful in the context of educational research or any research for that matter. To avoid such unnecessary juxtapositions, the present study therefore embraces a view of theoretical and empirical educational research as two different, yet interrelated/interdependent types of 'scientific research work' (understood in the German all-inclusive sense of *wissenschaftliche Arbeit*) that mutually inform and enrich one another and are hence, part of the same overall research process in the field of education.

This interconnected, collaborative view of theoretical/empirical research, however, raises new methodological questions to be taken into account when defining the nature of a research project such as mine. An important issue to consider here is the level of autonomy both types of *wissenschaftliche Arbeit* (can and/or should) have in this interdependent relationship. That this is an important issue to explore, specifically in relation to theoretical research, can be seen in the fact that respective academic debates often centre on the question of the role(s) and status of theory in educational (empirical) research[25], not vice versa, thereby implying a certain hierarchical order that ascribes greater autonomy and, perhaps, independent value to empirical types of investigation. Biesta, Allen and Edwards

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[25] See, for example: Ball (1995); Biesta, Allen and Edwards (2011); Carroll (1965); Higgs (2013); Ladson-Billing (2005) and Suppes (1974).

(2011), whilst focusing on the goal of 'research capacity building' with regard to theory in the field of Education, argue for example that theory may play several roles[26] in educational – and specifically, interpretive research – but that special attention should be given to 'object theory' which they define as those 'theories we use to conceptualise the phenomena in which we are interested and the theories we use to "make sense" of empirical findings' (Biesta et al., 2011, 235). This suggestion, however, can be judged to be problematic because the worth it ascribes to theory is connected, exclusively, to its functionality in empirical research:

> 'We are not advocating, therefore, that capacity building with regard to theory should focus on what we have called "autonomous theorising". We do not think in other words, that the capacity building that is needed should focus on philosophy, sociology or psychology if, that is, the focus would be entirely theoretical, that is disconnected from empirical research (…) We also do not think that capacity building with regard to theory should focus on meta-theory and methodology (…) The key challenge, so we wish to suggest is to focus the attention on *object-theory* (…) [Capacity building] needs to start, therefore, from real examples of real research, and based on an *informed* understanding of the possible roles of theory.' (Biesta et al., 2011, 325, emphases in the text, my insertion)

I would object that this statement contradicts the overall message of their article (which seems to speak of the value of theoretical educational work as a research type in its own right) as it implies that only empirical studies can ultimately be classified as 'real' research. If we accepted the condition that theory must always start from or at least focus on concrete real-life examples to be relevant to educational practice, we might ask: are theoretical studies that do not have such an obvious, direct empirical basis automatically *less*

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[26] Biesta, Allen and Edwards start by considering three main purposes of social research, which they see reflected, in turn, in three different research types. These three types of research are: research that aims to *explain*, research that aims to *understand*, and research that aims to *emancipate* (Biesta et al., 2011, 226). In the first case, the role of theory is to provide 'explanations of underlying causative processes and mechanisms' thus making plausible why the phenomena observed are correlated in the way they are (Biesta et al., 2011, 229-230). In interpretive research, the role of theory is thus to deepen 'understanding of everyday interpretations and experiences', e.g. by 'mak[ing] intelligible *why* people are saying and doing what they are saying and doing', as opposed to simply describing their words and actions without offering any interpretations of potential causes (Biesta et al., 2011, 229). The second type of research, they argue, is aimed at understanding phenomena. Here, the task of theory is not to explain causal links that exist between observable phenomena, but to contribute to our understanding of the plausibility of empirical findings, again through the process of interpretation. In this type of interpretive research, theorising seeks to '"add plausibility" to the accounts of social factors, first and foremost by giving re-descriptions of situations that make the actions of individuals and groups plausible' (Biesta et al., 2011, 230). And finally, the third area of educational research in which theory may play a significant role (according to Biesta et al.) can be found in the example of emancipatory or critical studies. The main difference between interpretive and critical forms of theorising within educational/social research is that, whilst interpretive approaches intend to offer only additional or alternative views to interpretations already generated by social actors, critical theory aims to *replace* such existing actor interpretations with what it determines as *better* ones as a result of the act of theorising undertaken because it seeks to shed light on how power and social position are used to '"structure" experience, articulation and interpretation' (Biesta et al., 2011, 331).

*real* than others, and what do we even mean by 'real' in this context? Surely, such a stance would only reinforce, rather than overcome the unhelpful dichotomies of theory versus practice or the non-empirical versus the empirical considered above. For this reason, I think it is necessary to specify further how exactly I interpret the interdependent relationship of theoretical and empirical educational research in the case of the study I propose, thereby showing as well to what extent theory is viewed as autonomous here. The main aspect to reveal (to provide this transparency) is that the present study does not use theory solely as a means to illuminate existing empirical research but sees it also as a *starting point* from which to consider educational phenomena in the first place, thereby also becoming a potential source of new empirical and/or non-empirical research itself. As such it is not just more independent than the type of theoretical research envisioned by Biesta et al., but also normative and prescriptive in nature, arguing, for example, for a new educational process and practice, rather than merely (re-)describing and (re-)interpreting what has already been found and established through evidence-based investigation.

This, however, does not mean that the type of sector-specific theorising proposed here (theorising that takes account of the legal parameters governing unaffiliated schools; compare section 1.3) is entirely 'autonomous' in the sense Biesta et al. reject (in the context of Philosophy, Sociology and Psychology) in the quotation above. First of all, ascribing an inherent value to the Philosophy of Education (and Philosophy of Religious Education in particular), whilst also appreciating the significance of empirical findings and the roles theory may play in (re-)interpreting, but also generating them (e.g. by providing the theoretical basis for further empirical and non-empirical research), this study therefore promotes a view of theory in educational research that is open to both empirically-driven and more independent forms of theorising. This means that, despite the fact that this study starts from an idea or 'hunch' (the foundational hypothesis that gaining theological understanding(s) is an important factor in becoming religiously literate in relation to theistic religions in and through RE; see section 1.5), thereby involving aspects of independent theorising, it also sees the relationship between theoretical and empirical research as intimately related. The data from which my study draws – literature relevant to its research focus – therefore includes both theoretical/philosophical content and empirical findings of relevant studies; and the two main aims it pursues are to contribute to (theoretical/empirical) research that already exists in the field of Religious Education as well as to provide a new interpretive framework for developing students' theological understanding(s) of religions in RE, which may then be the starting point for further empirical and non-empirical investigations. This view of the relationship of theoretical/empirical research is in accordance with Jean Anyon's (2009) appeal for a 'theoretically informed empiricism' in the field of Education. In *Theory and Educational Research: Toward Critical Social Explanation* (2009), Anyon (with Dumas, Linville, Nolan, Perez, Tuck and Weiss) describes her vision of such an empiricism, informed by theory, as an approach designed 'to engage research and the data it yields in constant *conversation* with a theoretical arsenal of powerful concepts' (Anyon et al., 2009, 2, my emphasis). Such conversation is important because:

> 'Neither data nor theory alone are adequate to the task of social explanation, (…) they imbricate and instantiate one another, forming and informing each other as the inquiry process unfolds'. (Anyon et al., 2009, 2)

This leads us to another reason why I would describe the type of sector-specific theorising taking place in my research as only 'semi-autonomous'. The main method I use (to be presented more fully in section 2.4 below), is an at least partially, systematic *review and critical analysis of relevant literature*, examined in and through what I would call a *process of dialogic philosophical argumentation*. What I mean by this is that I see my research project as an in-depth discussion happening between key figures (i.e. researchers and practitioners) in my fields of study whom I have selected on the basis of certain inclusion/exclusion criteria in the review phase(s) of this project (see section 1.5). For reasons explained in chapter 1, the topic of this discussion is the place of theology and theological understanding(s) in non-confessional multi-faith Religious Education, but there are sub-topics encountered on the way to my overall proposition for a theologically orientated approach applicable to all theistic religions studied in RE such as: the possible (un-)suitability of existing theology-centred approaches for the context of multi-faith RE (chapter 3); religious understanding and literacy (chapter 4); theological understanding/literacy and the potential role of theological understanding in developing religious literacy in RE (chapter 5); the possibility of using the idea of the centrality of transcendence in religious belief (and/or: God-centredness in theistic faith) as an interpretive lens for the study of theistic traditions (chapter 6), and issues of particularity and universality in the (comparative) study of religions (chapter 7). With the exception of moments in which the provision of overviews of different strands of thought, summarising and synthesising are necessary, e.g. to offer background information to the reader (see chapter 1, for instance), this discussion takes the form of a one-by-one engagement with individual views and arguments, following, by and large, the principles and structures of philosophical argumentation. Therefore, these individual dialogues – taking place either between individual RE researchers/practitioners and myself or among them – all tend to be constructed in similar ways and often start with the consideration of a point of view other than my own. Here follows the structure of philosophical argumentation used for the most part in this discussion (although it should be stressed that the order of individual items in the list may sometimes vary, and not all elements are always required):

- Presentation and analysis of argument
- Acceptance, modification, further development or rejection of argument
- Consideration and/or creation of counter-arguments and objections
- Consideration and/or creation of replies to these counter-arguments and objections
- Formulation of new thoughts and conclusions, leading to new argument(s) or question(s).

Using this structure, for the greater part of my review and critical analysis of literature, has the advantage that each individual train of thought considered in this thesis can be given sufficient attention, both in its own right and as a part of a greater picture, so that there is room for a detailed examination of individual viewpoints, deep philosophical reflection upon the variety of argumentative aspects thus surfacing in the discussion as well as careful development of my own proposition(s) as a direct result of these dialogic encounters.

To summarise: the study I propose has dialogical facets at two different, yet interrelated levels. At a macro-level, it seeks to engage existing research (empirical and non-empirical) in deep conversation with a particular theoretical issue or question in the study of religions in schools – the potential role(s) that gaining theological understanding(s) may play in developing religious literacy in non-confessional, multi-faith Religious Education. At a micro-level, i.e. with regard to the methods it uses for argument construction, it also enters into numerous dialogues with a wide range of differing voices in this field of study, seeing them as argumentative threads, which – by the end of this research process – will all be interwoven, despite their varying colours and textures, into one piece of tapestry which thus becomes pre-existent and new at the same time.

## 2.2 Methods in the Context of Philosophy of Education

Having defined the present study as one that is rooted in the broad field of Philosophy of Education and engaging in the practice of 'sector-specific, semi-autonomous theorising' using the methods of literature review/analysis in a process of 'dialogic philosophical argumentation', I shall provide a short explanation of what I mean by the term 'Philosophy of Education' in the present study to then proceed to examine the question of methods as well as problems with research methodology that I see involved in this context. The *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education* defines Philosophy of Education as 'that branch of philosophy that addresses philosophical questions concerning the nature, aims, and problems of education' and adds that, as a branch of Practical Philosophy, those involved in it will typically look both *inward* to the parent discipline of Philosophy and *outward* to educational practice, as well as to related disciplines such as Developmental Psychology, Sociology, etc. (Siegel, Ed., 2010, para 1). Further specifications of what Philosophy of Education is and does, according to this general definition, revolve around a number of basic questions and problems with which philosophers of education are concerned. Here, the *Oxford Handbook* points, for example, to questions such as 'what are the proper aims and guiding ideals of education?' and 'what are the appropriate criteria for evaluating educational efforts, institutions, practices, and products?', but also to problems such as the authority of the state/teachers; students' rights; the character of the 'purported ideal' of critical thinking and 'undesirable phenomena' like indoctrination; and the best way to conduct moral education, etc. (Siegel, Ed., 2010, para 2).[27] Translating some of these aspects to the subject-specific research area of the present study – the Philosophy of *Religious* Education – I would summarise that this study is concerned both with general questions related to the nature and aims of Religious Education (e.g. confessionalism/non-confessionalism; religious understanding and literacy, representation of theistic religions; see chapters 3 and 4) as well as the particular theoretical issue which I described, in the introduction, as the 'problem of (perceived) incompatibility' between theology and the values of non-confessional, multi-faith RE. In exploring this problem and searching for a possible theoretical/practical solution to it, I make use of methods in the field of Philosophy (e.g. dialogic philosophical argumentation; see section 2.1); general research methodologies in the Social Sciences (e.g. the principles of systematic review methods; see section 2.4); and specific methodological approaches to the study of religions in the related discipline of RS (e.g. Smart's multi-dimensional, phenomenological scheme of study; see section 5.2.3). Moreover, given my research focus on theological understanding, my study addresses a number of specific theology-centred questions in the Philosophy of Religious Education to do with the nature, aims and purposes of the subject, including: what is the place of theology in RE, and how do theology and RS relate to one another in this context? What conditions must theology fulfil to be adequate for non-confessional RE? How can indoctrination (if there is such a link) be avoided in the context of theology in religiously unaffiliated schools? Etc.

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[27] Another way of looking at Philosophy of Education is by identifying three different impulses commonly found in it: prescriptive, analytical and critical (Burbules and Raybeck, 2019, para 5-12). In an article included in the *StateUniversity.com Education Encyclopedia*, Burbules and Raybeck distinguish these strands within the disciplinary field as follows: *prescriptive* Philosophy of Education (which is the oldest and most pervasive inclination) seeks 'to offer a philosophically defended conception of what the aims and activities of teaching ought to be' (Burbules and Raybeck, 2019, para 5). By contrast, Philosophy of Education that has an *analytical* impulse 'approaches the philosophical task as spelling out a set of rational conditions that educational aims and practices ought to satisfy' but leaves it up to other public deliberative processes to work out the practical implications and particular measures needed to fulfil them (Burbules and Raybeck 2019, para 8). And finally, they explain, the third impulse – a *critical* orientation within Philosophy of Education – often coexists with one of the above approaches because there is considerable overlap between this third type and the other two. For example, like Philosophy of Education that follows analytical impulses, critical approaches try 'to clear the ground of misconceptions and ideologies, where these misrepresent the needs and interests of disadvantaged groups'; and like prescriptive approaches, critical Philosophy of Education, too, 'is driven by a positive conception of a better, more just and equitable, society' (Burbules and Raybeck, 2019, para 11). This classification of different strands or impulses within the Philosophy of Education is helpful because it takes into account that, just as there are multiple types of philosophy and ways of philosophising reflecting different concerns and motivations, there are also many types of educational philosophy, in short: *philosophies of education* that can be classified, distinguished from one another, and still overlap in certain respects (Frankena, 2019, para 3)

It is important to realise, though, that this view of Philosophy of Education is sometimes interpreted, negatively, as belonging to a specific Anglo-American construction of the field of Educational Studies, which can be problematic and has already been criticised, at least implicitly, in the context of disciplinary identities in section 2.1. To show that my use of the term 'Philosophy of (Religious) Education' is consistent with the German-influenced definition of scientific work (*wissenschaftliche Arbeit*) outlined above, I need to present and respond to this criticism briefly here. What I mean by this is that the multi-methodological, interdisciplinary focus of my definition of Philosophy of (Religious) Education could be traced back to a view of Educational Studies that sees this disciplinary field as that of the 'interdisciplinary study of educational phenomena', in which Philosophy takes the position of one of its 'foundational disciplines' – together with History, Psychology and Sociology (see Ruitenberg, 2009a). It could then be criticised that, although these disciplines undoubtedly have something important to say about education, the fact that they do this each with their own, disciplinary voice raises questions of authority such as: 'who gets to ask educational questions and from which perspective and why' (compare Biesta et al., 2011)? Again, the situation might be slightly different in German-speaking academic contexts where Education has historically been firmly established, more so than in the UK, as a discipline in its own right, with its own academic tradition (Bridges & Smith, 2006; Hofstetter & Schneuwly, 2002), and is therefore not seen to the same extent as a Social Science subject which, by definition, approaches educational phenomena from an interdisciplinary viewpoint, adopting a multitude of methodological lenses. In the Anglo-American context, one might argue, however, where interdisciplinarity and multi-methodology are ingrained into the subject's identity, it is probably inevitable that the individual disciplines upon which it draws will bring their own, unique research foci, methodologies and voices to the research field. The question is just whether this configuration of the discipline of Educational Studies and the role and status philosophical enquiry has in it, for instance, is harmful to the academic self-understanding of Education (as Biesta et al. argue, for instance). My reaction to this would be that the answer to this question depends on whether or not one defines the academic field of Education, *exclusively*, in terms of its interdisciplinary/multi-methodological nature, that is as the sum of the disciplines upon which it is founded, or as something which can be *both*: a discipline in its own right with its own (constantly evolving) academic identity and tradition, e.g. shaped by its subject-specific research interests, as well as an area of study and research that, as a result of this very tradition, also draws upon a variety of related disciplines. Viewed in this light, the interdisciplinary element in the definition of Educational Studies that is sometimes criticised (Biesta et al., 2011; Ruitenberg, 2009b) does not have to be interpreted as a negative influence on the subject's continuous identity formation. On the contrary, in a world where calls for more interdisciplinary/cross-departmental collaboration at the level of higher-education research and beyond is a visible trend[28], education might even pride itself on the opportunities it naturally provides in this area.

With regard to the task of defining Philosophy of Education, I would therefore claim, following David Meens, that the term should be understood to refer to two different, yet interconnected concepts. On the one hand, Philosophy of Education is a 'distinct subfield within the field of Education Studies (or research)', e.g. in the sense discussed above. On the other hand, it is also a 'specialization within the academic discipline of philosophy'

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[28] Evidence for recent calls for more interdisciplinarity in research can be found, for example, in the British Academy report (2016) 'Crossing Paths: Interdisciplinary Institutions, Careers, Education and Applications' (British Academy, 2016); the Science Europe Position Statement: 'Horizon 2020: Excellence Counts' (Science Europe, 2012); and the Global Research Council's 2015 report: 'Global funders to focus on interdisciplinarity' (2015) in *Nature* 525, 313-315 (Global Research Council, 2015).

(Meens, 2013, 368). The reason why this differentiation is important is because it tells us something about the question of method in the context of Philosophy of Education. Thus, it is arguable that, whilst philosophers of education, due to the strong interdisciplinary emphasis of Educational Studies, are likely to share the subject matter on which they concentrate with researchers from a range of related disciplines, the specific methods they use, on the contrary, are mainly drawn from the practices of the field of academic Philosophy (Meens, 2013). This leads us, finally, to the difficult questions of what we mean by 'methods' in the context of Philosophy (in and outside the field of Education), how they may differ from those methods commonly used in empirical research, and why these differences may sometimes create problems for philosophers of education. In the next section, I will explore these issues with the intention of showing which of the difficulties considered below have had an impact on the research process of the present study.

## 2.3 Problems with Research Methodology in the Context of Philosophy of Education

According to Claudia Ruitenberg, one thing that has often been overlooked in discussions about research methods is that, although the 'work of philosophers of education and philosophers more generally has not been without method', the ways they conduct research is rarely thought of as falling into the category of 'research methods' (Ruitenberg, 2009b, 315). Evidence for this can be found, for example, in the fact that, even in Philosophy departments themselves, where one might think that there would be at least some focus on teaching students *how* to do Philosophy, research methods courses are rather uncommon. For Ruitenberg, this reveals the hidden assumption evidently made by these departments that students will somehow learn to read and write philosophy by, 'well, reading and writing philosophy' (Ruitenberg, 2009b, 316). Another factor contributing to the current confusion about research methods in Philosophy (of Education) and the lack of transparency about methodological choices in respective research is that philosophers themselves often shy away from the task of formulating their research methods (Biesta, 2009; Biesta et al., 2011; Meens, 2013; Ruitenberg, 2009b). One reason for this, one might argue, is that it is rather difficult to reveal one's methodological choices in the field of Philosophy because in philosophical research, content and methodology are often barely distinguishable from one another. Paul Standish puts it this way:

> 'The question of method in philosophy is a vexed one, and for a good reason. 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 (…) 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 it. *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 one's method becomes caught up in the substance of one's research interest. *Sometimes content and method are one.*' (Standish, 2009, i , my emphases)

This brings us back to the central question raised at the start of this chapter: how can researchers involved in purely theoretical and/or philosophical work in the field of education support the collaborative (interdependent) view of theoretical/empirical research promoted above, whilst at the same time sustaining a certain autonomy and, perhaps, authenticity in their methodological choices and research processes? Or, to put it another way, how can they develop research methodologies that are as free as possible, but not more disconnected than necessary and appropriate, from the expectations of empirical Social Science research?

One possible starting point for such an endeavour might be to emphasise the crucial role that the subjective mind of the researcher plays in the process of philosophising, and to accept that this methodological characteristic may never be reconciled, entirely, with the desired objectivity of most empirical methods of investigation, which makes the values of self-awareness and self-reflection even more important. This is because, at a very basic level, methods in the context of Philosophy will always be intimately connected, if not equated, with the ways in which the person conducting the research *thinks*. I therefore agree with Ruitenberg that the term 'methods' as employed by philosophers of education ultimately refers to the various ways in which these individuals 'think, read, write, speak and listen, that make their work systematic, purposeful and responsive to past and present philosophical and educational concerns and conversations' (Ruitenberg, 2009b, 316). Yet, this appeal to the individuality of philosophical writing processes does not mean that it is impossible to reveal one's research methodology as a theorist/philosopher of education. I would therefore add to Ruitenberg's definition of philosophers' research methods that people think *in different ways*, which makes it reasonable to claim that there are also different 'ways of thinking', 'ways of arguing', etc. that can and should be disclosed, and thus made as explicit as possible, at the start of a philosophy thesis such as mine. For this reason, my introductory chapter includes several paragraphs in several sections (see sections 1.4 to 1.5 in particular) that reveal the most central assumptions underpinning the form of logic and rationality on which the present study is based (e.g. definitions of theism, theistic belief, transcendence, but also a foundational hypothesis, etc.) – a methodological practice which will also be maintained throughout the chapters, as the thesis, and with it, my overall philosophical argument, proceed.

Another challenge involved in explaining methodological choices in the context of philosophical research is a very simple one: given that writing in general, but perhaps even more so in the field of Philosophy, is a very creative activity that does not always follow strict rules (e.g. regarding textual structure and content selection), it so happens that philosophers can sometimes be unaware where their arguments lead them (let alone *how* they are writing their texts) until they have actually finished the writing process. This may not be true of all philosophers. In fact, there are schools of philosophy with which writers might associate themselves, and some branches have very clear methods, such as Logic, for instance. But this does not mean that it cannot be important for others – and I would identify myself in some respects with this group – to have a more open-ended and flexible procedure in which both method and content constantly evolve as part of the writing act.

This, it is arguable, makes it difficult to choose one's research methods prior to completion of a given piece of writing. One could object, of course, that such criticisms falsely assume that methodologies/methods need to be predetermined, thus ignoring the possibility that, especially in theoretical research, a methodology chapter such as this one could also be used to describe which choices were made (and why) *post facto*. Yet, while this may be possible (and hence true) in some cases, it is nonetheless important to realise that such an approach to methodology, e.g. in the context of postgraduate educational research, is a very different one to take than what would commonly be expected of (postgraduate) researchers involved in empirical educational work – namely, to define and write their research methodology early on in the research process. To some extent, I would claim, a *post-facto* description of methodological choices even risks missing the point of what methodology is meant to be and do for any research project, empirical or otherwise – which is to provide the theoretical framework within which the methods employed *can be justified*, to use Harding's definition again (1987). Although it might be feasible for theorists/philosophers of education to consider, retrospectively, the methodological choices they made throughout the writing process or to try reflecting on them and noting them while they write, so as to be able to report them later, (because, presumably, they must have reasons for each and every turn they take in their writing), the extent to which this is possible and the benefit of it are somewhat questionable. Thus, one might ask, for instance: does such an approach not implicitly assume that the chosen methods reported at the end of the research process, and included in the respective methodology chapter, were the most appropriate ones to select simply because of the fact that they *happened to be* the ones selected? If nothing else, this tells us that the relationship between philosophy (or Philosophy of Education) and methodology is not uncomplicated. (How I have tried to create a balance between using predetermined methods and allowing for flexibility and change in the methodological choices of this study will be explained in the next and final section of this chapter.)

Here, one might also point to Smith's claim that philosophy should be viewed as a form of art, rather than a science, namely the art of reading and listening in deep concentration so as to prepare for those moments of insight that may then give birth to philosophical reflection and argumentation (Smith, 2009). It could therefore be argued that thinking in terms of having a method in Philosophy at all, still more any type of methodological approach, will always automatically provoke certain feelings of 'awkwardness' in the writer's mind. As indicated above, however, I agree with this position only to some extent.

Just because, for some writers involved in philosophical/theoretical work, choosing a method or methods before entering the writing stage may not always be feasible, this does not mean that they cannot or should not select theories, concepts, conversation partners, etc. (as I have done in this thesis), in short: the raw material with which to think in the writing process. For me, the 'art' of writing a philosophical work such as this one lies therefore more in the ways I approach and engage with the theories, concepts, key voices, etc. chosen for the particular discussion of this research project, than in the given type of writing or genre in which that discussion takes place.

Yet, even if we may not wish to go as far as to say that writing a philosophical study in education is tantamount to creating an artwork, it could be appreciated that there may still be something fundamentally different about the processes of structuring and writing theoretical, as opposed to empirical, research – regardless of the discipline. In a recent study focusing on the genre of research articles in the field of theoretical mathematics, for example, Kuteeva and MacGrath (2015) draw the conclusion that the macro-structure of theoretical research articles differs significantly from that of articles publishing empirical findings. Rather than following the conventional IMRAD structure, usually found in empirical studies, that groups an article's content into the neat sections of Introduction, Methods, Results, Analysis and Discussion, research articles in theoretical mathematics seem to possess their own individual features, using a variety of creative rhetorical and organisational structures, and can also be seen as a reflection of the disciplinary practices and epistemology of pure mathematics itself (Kuteeva & McGrath, 2015, 215). In this case, this is apparent in the fact that most of the alternative structures used in the twenty-two examined articles were produced by the dual (mathematical and meta-mathematical) argumentation characteristic of these types of discussion. Applying these conclusions to the area of educational research, we might therefore begin to question the extent to which a strong focus on methodological considerations in the writing of theoretical/philosophical studies in Education, revealed for example in the frequent use of the traditional IMRAD (or at least IMD) structure in PhD theses[29] (Kuteeva & McGrath, 2015), truly matches the disciplinary practice of Philosophy of Education.

Against this background, the mere attempt to incorporate a methodology chapter into a thesis like this one could then be interpreted as evidence of the pressure that currently exists in the field of Educational Studies to match both the textual structure and approaches to methodology in written work to those structures and methods commonly used in empirical Social Science studies. This, in turn, could be traced back to the phenomenon of 'uncritical worship of method' – or 'methodolatry' as Rorty puts it – that continues to shape academic research in general and educational/Social Science research specifically (Rorty, 1999). From this negative perspective, raising the issue of methodology in the context of Philosophy of Education at all (for example, as a result of the concern in metaphilosophy with the field's capacity for self-reflection and in-depth exploration of the nature and aims of Philosophy as well as methodology) could be viewed as a regrettable 'concession' to an oppressive intellectual climate (Standish, 2009, i-ii) that forces philosophers of education to 'put on the ill-fitting and un-becoming coat of methodology' originally 'cut to fit [their] younger and more popular friends in the natural and Social Sciences' (Meens, 2013, 370). This might explain why Ruitenberg points to the possibility that the current focus on methodology in (meta-)philosophical debates about educational research, demonstrated, for instance, in most of the sources cited in this chapter, could also be a sign of certain professional insecurities that researchers have developed amidst the given intellectual climate (Ruitenberg, 2009b).

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[29] See, for example, the *Postgraduate Research Handbook* of the University of Exeter.

On the other hand, though, (and I would see myself, again, more in the middle of these two positions) it can of course just as well be argued that this self-scrutiny displayed by many educational philosophers today benefits both the work they produce as researchers and the field of study to which they contribute (Meens, 2013). One thing that is gained in this way, Meens claims, is a potential for greater 'clarity concerning what philosophers of education may offer their partners in inquiry' who research educational issues from different disciplinary points of view, namely a heartfelt 'commitment to the carefully reasoned discussion of questions of value' (Meens, 2013, 371). The better philosophers know themselves (one might add) – and this certainly requires some methodological awareness – the greater the clarity with which to establish distinctive roles for philosophical educational research in this interdisciplinary practice. Standish argues in a similar context that not just beginners of philosophical research, but also:

> 'Experienced philosophers (…) should be sensitised to the benefit that reflection on such matters can bring. Insight into this variety of approaches is not only practically useful: it also opens possibilities of thought that otherwise escape the agenda of research. And in the end these release the kinds of enquiry into education that answers to the demands of practice in unparalleled ways. Hence, there is every reason to attempt some kind of examination of what philosophers of education do and how they do it.' (Standish, 2009, i)

This, I would argue, is not far away from a more general articulation of the benefits of reflexivity in academic writing – independent of disciplinary affiliations. The general epistemological question to ask in each case of research would then be: 'what constitutes knowledge in the given field of study?' As a bare minimum, this requires us to define those criteria that have to be met for one set of ideas (e.g. in a research project) to be accepted as 'true', while others would be rejected. This is another reason why I have followed the principles of philosophical argumentation in this thesis, such as assessing internal consistency, overall validity and soundness of individual arguments and relating them to possible objections/replies, which must then be checked as well for consistency, validity, soundness. This is necessary because, without criteria like these, we would have no way of checking the plausibility of the positions analysed and developed here and would thus potentially be doomed to relativism.

As a final step in this chapter, I will therefore present the main methods I have used to avoid these problems, namely a systematic review and critical analysis of relevant literature, which (for reasons explained below) was carried out in the style of, but not total commitment to, the rules and principles of Systematic Research Methods (SRM).

## 2.4 This Study's Approach: A Flexible Application of Systematic Research Methods

As indicated above, I decided not to adopt the strict empirical style of systematic review methods[30] in this study but made use of some aspects of this approach. The main research method of this study is therefore best described as one in which relevant literature was reviewed systematically, following some, but not all of the principles of conducting a systematic review, thus applying the prescribed steps only partially, for example, or in a different order at times. To be able to explain why certain choices were made and others rejected, I first need to reveal the overall structure of my research process and then, present the specific tools and methods I used in different phases of it.

I started this study by defining a broad research topic (born out of the personal interest revealed in chapter 1 and the insights I had gained through earlier work experience and research), namely the role and status of theological understanding within multi-faith Religious Education. After an initial reading phase around this topic concentrating on key contributors in this area of research (such as those listed in the introduction), this focus was narrowed down to the potential role(s) that gaining an understanding or understandings of theological content may play in becoming religiously literate in relation to theistic religions in non-confessional, multi-faith RE. This was the result of one of the first impressions I received from skim reading a large amount of two main areas of literature, the first one being concerned with theology in the context of Religious Education and the second one dealing with contemporary methodological approaches to RE, namely that – even though the significance of 'religious literacy' is being emphasised by many researchers, practitioners, interest groups and policy-makers in the field of Religious Education today – there is hardly any mention in respective literature of the role that theological understanding might have in reaching this goal. In fact, it became quite apparent that the most frequently expressed view on the subject matter is that theology is not a legitimate approach to non-confessional RE as it inevitably intends, in one way or another, to indoctrinate children with a particular (usually, Christian) belief and/or worldview. Further research into this possible causal correlation between the contested role of theology in RE and its supposed links to confessionalism and indoctrination, led me to identify – again, in the research literature of RE – the perceived compatibility problem, described in more detail in the introduction, which is based on the assumption that furthering theological understanding(s) in Religious Education contradicts the values of non-confessional multi-faith RE because using theological methods and focusing on theological content in the classroom cannot be divorced from traditional confessional intentions. The possibility of this argumentation opened up new areas of literature searches for me, such as those centring on the definition and potential relationship of theology, confessionalism and indoctrination – all still in the context of Religious Education – as well as theoretical developments and pedagogical changes, mainly taking place in the 1960s and 1970s, which have led to what has been described as the (potential) 'marginalisation' of theology in RE.

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[30] Andy Siddaway (2017) provides a useful presentation of the key steps involved in using SRM. The steps he summarises are the five processes of scoping, planning, identification (or searching), screening and eligibility (or evaluation). In the *scoping phase*, the researcher needs to formulate one or more research questions to develop a clear idea of the type of research findings that will be relevant to addressing the given question(s).

In the *planning phase*, the researcher breaks these question(s) down into individual concepts to create search terms. The aim is to conduct a search that is exhaustive (i.e. including all relevant articles written on the chosen topic) and will thus be representative of all relevant studies ever conducted on the topic of research. When producing a list of search terms for the systematic literature review, it is therefore important to consider synonyms; singular/plural forms of key words; different word types (verbs, adjectives, nouns); different spellings (i.e. BE/AE) as well as to think of broader and narrower expressions (such as UK, Britain, England, etc.). It is also crucial to formulate (at least, provisional) inclusion and exclusion criteria to define which sources are relevant to the study at hand, thereby ensuring the quality of included studies and defining the boundaries of the review. And finally, another requirement of the planning phase is to create clear record keeping systems (e.g. search tables).

Next, beginning the *identification* phase, the researcher should use the search terms to search at least two different (relevant) electronic databases. Here, some important considerations are to use limits, filters and Boolean search operators ('AND', 'OR', 'NOT') to broaden or narrow the search.

Then, in the *screening* phase, the chosen references should be exported to an electronic citation manager to collate the search results. This facilitates the screening tasks because it saves time, eliminates duplicate versions of the same work and formats the references in the required referencing style.

And finally, approaching the question of *eligibility*, the researcher needs to make sure that potentially eligible studies (e.g. included on the basis of skim reading abstracts/conclusions) are indeed relevant to the topic at hand and appropriate for inclusion. In this phase, it is necessary to evaluate the quality and relevance of each study to then extract from it, in a final thorough examination, all relevant information and data relating to the inclusion criteria specified in earlier steps of the systematic literature review. (Summary based on Siddaway, 2017).

It was only then that my main research question could be specified as: how can the compatibility problem that is thought to exist between furthering theological understanding and adhering to the values of non-confessional, multi-faith Religious Education be overcome to re-establish theological content as an important focal point in RE in schools that are religiously unaffiliated (see sections 1.4 and 1.5)? Again, through further reading and analysing related literature and engaging in deep philosophical reflection, I then formulated the following working hypothesis (section 1.5): one way of reconciling the use of a theologically orientated approach with the goals and ethical principles of non-confessional, multi-faith RE is to define 'theological understanding' mainly in terms of its objects of study (see chapter 5), and to introduce, therefore, an interpretive framework for furthering students' understanding(s) of key concepts, teachings and practices relating to the divine that does not presuppose theistic faith on the part of the students and is applicable to all monotheistic and polytheistic religions studied in RE. This interreligious view of theology, in turn, led me to a continued search for, as well as reconsideration of, existing theology-centred approaches examined in earlier stages of the literature review (as part of the broader investigation of common pedagogies of multi-faith RE), but with the changed perspective that it was now necessary to examine the extent to which these theology-centred approaches already promote such an interreligious theological understanding and/or could be modified to incorporate the interreligious aspect more effectively.

This is where the formulation of inclusion criteria became most useful to the creative process of reading, writing and analysing literature. Methodological approaches considered had to meet the following four criteria: first, they had to be designed for the context of Religious Education in England and Wales. Second, they had to be theology-centred (e.g. using the term 'theology' or 'theological' themselves to describe their methodological lens) or God-centred in the wider sense that they put the role of belief in God/gods/ultimate reality in the study of at least one theistic religion at the centre of learning in RE. (As we will see in chapter 3, this includes methodological approaches that are transcendence-orientated, in a more general sense, but applicable to theistic religions in the way outlined in section 1.4). Third, they needed to enable students to gain insights into key concepts, teachings as well as practices relating to belief in the divine in the religion(s) studied. And fourth, they either had to have an interreligious focus already (in the sense that they were specifically designed for use in relation to different theistic religions) or – which turned out to be the most frequent case – they would claim to be applicable to theistic religions other than the one in which they were rooted (usually Christianity).

Finally, the main methods I used from this point on in the literature review were continual processes of interpretation of the selected sources, critical analysis and evaluation of the arguments and theories encountered (including the creation of my own replies and counter-arguments) as well as the (further) development of my own interpretive framework and criteria for the promotion of an interreligious version of theological understanding (defined as understanding of theological content of different religions) in multi-faith RE. Yet, as should be clear from the description of this structure of the research process, the elements of critical analysis and evaluation should not be viewed as separate, final stages of the literature review, but rather as essential components of my methodological approach which were used, sometimes more, sometimes less, throughout the whole research.

Realising this need for flexibility in the review/analysis process, I decided against a strict adherence to the rules and principles of SRM. However, since it was nevertheless my aim to review relevant literature as systematically as possible so as to provide this study with the rigour, transparency and comprehensiveness required for academic research, I have made (partial) use of a few of the steps, methods and tools prescribed by the rules of employing SRM. A quick comparison with the five stages (scoping, planning, identifying/selecting, screening, and evaluating), commonly involved in systematic reviews, will illustrate this (compare Siddaway 2017):

- Even though it was impossible, during the initial *scoping phase*, to formulate specific research questions in order to determine right from the start, which types of research findings would be most relevant to the study, I used my broad research focus (theology/theological understanding in multi-faith RE) for the localisation and identification of generally relevant studies to develop a more specific focus from there (the role of theological understanding in becoming religiously literate). The subsequent review of the material found in this way then allowed me to re-commence a somewhat delayed scoping phase, in which I defined my main research problem and articulated resulting research questions and hypotheses.

- Thus, it was possible, in the *planning phase*, to deduce from these research questions and hypotheses a number of key search terms to use in the subsequent review process. In addition to the general search terms identified at the beginning of the research (theology, theism, 'belief in God', transcendence, 'Religious Education', 'Religious Instruction', 'multi-faith', 'aims of Religious Education', 'approaches to RE', etc.), new terms were selected as central to the chosen topic such as 'religious understanding', 'religious literacy', confessional and non-confessional, indoctrination, interreligious, 'cross-denominational', etc. Wherever possible, I also considered singular and plural forms (e.g. belief, beliefs), synonyms (e.g.

interreligious, interfaith) different spellings (e.g. interreligious, inter-religious), abbreviations (e.g. RE, RI) different word types (e.g. theology, theological) as well as broader and narrower expressions (e.g. United Kingdom, England; British, English). However, what would not have been reasonable to do at this stage of the review process was to try to conduct an exhaustive literature search aiming to include all articles ever written on the topics of the relationship between Theology and Religious Education because, due to the interdisciplinarity of this research focus, the sheer amount of literature produced in the related fields was too enormous to be read and analysed by just one researcher and in the time limit set by the PhD. (Initial attempts at doing this generated search result counts in the thousands.) The reason for this was that purely theoretical/philosophical research such as the present one requires a much more in-depth approach to reading and analysing literature than it tends to be necessary in the context of many empirical Social Science studies where skim reading can be a valuable option in the review's early stages. For example, had I evaluated the likely relevance of studies simply by reading abstracts and conclusions, as recommended in the context of SRM in this phase, I would have missed significant content of articles which, although not being central to the given textual source itself (and hence, mentioned only as a sub-theme, for example), contributed to the further development of my research questions, hypotheses and thereby, also the creation of my own core arguments.

- In the subsequent *identification stage*, when I inserted the search terms into electronic data bases most relevant to my chosen topic and fields of study (mainly EBSCO and JSTOR), I paid particular attention to the use of the Boolean search operators 'AND' and 'NOT' to specify connections and draw terms together into precisely the logical units upon which I needed to concentrate. For instance, combinations such as 'theology AND Religious Education' or 'theology AND Religious Education NOT Christianity' (again, inserted also in different spellings and word types) made it possible to narrow down individual search activities to a level where it was possible to aim for exhaustiveness at least in these sub-areas of research. As indicated above, it was in this phase that it was most beneficial to the progress of the research to formulate inclusion criteria, albeit only with regard to the most central research area of the study: theology-centred approaches to multi-faith RE. Given the brevity and straightforwardness of the inclusion criteria listed above, it was not necessary, however, to also articulate exclusion criteria, explicitly, for the review because these could be easily derived from the former. Thus, methodological approaches such as Hull's (experiential) thematic approach to RE (Hull, 1975d), the Biblos Project (Copley, Freathy, & Walshe, 2004; Copley, Lane, Savini, & Walshe, 2001) of the early 2000s or the more recent Understanding Christianity project, introduced by the Church of England Education (CofE) Office in 2016, were excluded from my consideration of theology-centred approaches because they did not meet the requirements of being explicitly God-centred (Hull) or (in the case of the other two approaches) either already interreligious or at least, aspiring to include the study of religions other than Christianity.

- Although there was not a clearly defined, separate *screening phase* which this study underwent within an identifiable period of time, it is worth mentioning that I found it useful, right from the beginning of the research, to follow the recommendation of using an electronic citation manager (Mendeley) for screening and storing my searches. This facilitated, immensely, the continuous process of referencing so central to philosophical work. Apart from erasing duplicate versions of the same work, the citation manager saved and backed up my search results and electronic documents, synchronised my bibliographies on different devices and also formatted and updated both my in-text references and bibliographical end-notes in the required referencing style used in my academic department (APA). It is important to note, though, that an even more significant tool which I used alongside Mendeley in all research phases, was Microsoft OneNote. With this software, I gathered practically all information relating to my research in one interactive notebook made up of a great number of interlinked folders, consisting in turn of a variety of different types of evidence and information such as typed and hand-written documents, drawings, screen clippings (e.g. of websites, scans and photos), inserted PDF and Microsoft Word/Excel files (which again could be annotated in typed or hand-written form), etc. Regarding the screening phase, this tool was particularly useful for archiving work protocols, search records, lists of references, and reading lists (some alphabetically, some thematically structured). The greatest advantage of using this information gathering tool in the review phases leading up to the critical evaluation of the selected literature was that all elements in the notebook, regardless of format and saving location, could be linked, electronically, in various ways, using different parameters, simultaneously, such as initial insertion dates, to-do commands (e.g. read/unread) and thematic tags created by myself for the purpose of classifying and grouping together different types of evidence. This provided me with a diversity of options when it came to identifying relevant material, discovering differences and similarities in written content, or simply relocating archived information.

- Use of this tool was even more crucial during the ongoing *evaluation process* which, due to the theoretical/philosophical nature of my study, should also be seen as part of the overall research method, rather than a separate phase in the review process. Here, it might help to explain the annotation system I created for reading, interpreting and analysing all textual documents I inserted into my research notebook (mostly, PDF and Word documents, but also screened-clipped online material/e-books and scanned versions of hard-copy books). In summary, I annotated the whole body of literature reviewed in this study, using the typing and drawing functions of OneNote. This means that I added, depending on which device I used (laptop, tablet, phone, etc.) hand-written (with electronic-pen technology) or typed comments into all relevant places of the readings I examined and equipped them, additionally, with thematic tags (e.g. individual terms such as 'theological understanding', 'religious understanding', 'religious literacy' or combined with contextual factors like 'RE' or 'UK') that would link them together thereby facilitating the challenging task of synthesising information. Another aspect of this method of annotation, specifically important to the processes of interpretation and critical analysis, was the colour code I invented to highlight words, phrases or whole paragraphs of the readings examined. I used four colours, each of which reflected a different perspective and intention from which the given content was written by the author(s). Thus, yellow indicated the author's or authors' own views and opinions, but not necessarily their key arguments and conclusions, for which I reserved the colour red. Blue was used whenever the author or authors of a text appealed to other scholars' views, but with the obvious intention of backing up their own argumentation/conclusions. And green indicated objections and counter-arguments, either made by other scholars and mentioned by the author(s) to then give their replies or made by the authors themselves when playing devil's advocate. Combined with the more elaborate, written annotations (including my own arguments, objections and replies, again all equipped with respective tagging search functions), this method enabled me to create quick summaries of articles and comparisons of the argumentative content of different sources, as well as, for example, lists of all the objections to a certain theory (e.g. that theology is not a legitimate approach to multi-faith RE) that I myself had made during the whole review process.

It should therefore be evident that, although I decided not to use SRM officially in this study, I nevertheless reviewed and analysed literature very systematically. The most important methodological choice I made in this research process was certainly my use of the information gathering tool OneNote. As a system of ordering thoughts, it helped me to ensure that the ways in which I read and wrote over the course of the whole project were indeed 'systematic, purposeful and responsive to past and present philosophical and educational concerns and conversations' – to return, once more, to Ruitenberg's definition of research methods in the context of Philosophy of Education (Ruitenberg, 2009b, 316). Thus, I was able to allow myself enough freedom from methodological constraints to develop this study as creatively as its theoretical/philosophical nature required, whilst also benefiting from those scientific research methods recommended in my field of study which were indeed useful, and not a hindrance, to its overall success.

Having shared the main methodological considerations and problems influencing the research process of this project and provided a detailed presentation of the methods (of review, critical analysis and philosophical argumentation) employed in it, I will now start the main discussion of the role of theology and theological understanding(s) in multi-faith RE. The next chapter will therefore begin by exploring and analysing three examples of existing theology-centred approaches, focusing in particular on the question of whether or not (or to what extent) they could be evaluated as adequate responses to the (perceived) compatibility problem identified in the previous chapter.

# 3 Three Theology-Centred Approaches: To What Extent are They Suitable for the Context of Non-Confessional RE?

This chapter investigates three examples of methodological approaches that put theology or theological concerns at the heart of the study of religions in schools. These theology-centred approaches to RE are: Cooling's (1994b, 2000) revelation-centred, concept-cracking strategy (see section 3.2); Teece's (2008, 2010c, 2012) soteriological framework for RE (see section 3.3) and the narrative approach to theology in RE promoted by Reed and Freathy (Freathy et al., 2014; Reed et al., 2013) (see sections 3.4 and 3.5). A general goal of this methodology-focused chapter is to provide insight into pedagogical/methodological approaches that have been designed for the particular purpose of furthering theological understanding(s) in non-confessional, multi-faith RE as well as to discuss major criticisms that can be raised against them, thus giving the reader a clear idea of the pedagogical background against which this study is written. More specifically, however, the chapter also aims to assess the extent to which these theology-centred pedagogies and teaching methods can be evaluated as adequate responses to modern multi-faith RE, i.e. in terms of their ability to meet the subject's demands for non-confessionalism, impartiality and openness to, or inclusion of, all theistic religions in the study of theological content in schools without a religious affiliation. This will help to determine whether these pedagogical propositions are capable of overcoming the compatibility problem that is thought to exist between theology (and the goal of promoting theological understanding/understandings) and the values of non-confessional, multi-faith RE (see sections 1.1 and 1.2). The final section (3.6) will then summarise important conclusions drawn from this critical analysis of relevant literature about the current state of theology in non-confessional, multi-faith RE and the significance of this study's focus on interreligious investigation within today's research climate.

As indicated in section 2.4 of my methodology chapter, the reason why I have selected these specific examples for this part of the literature review/analysis is that, in contrast to other existing theological approaches (such as Hull's thematic approach, the Biblos Project, and Understanding Christianity), they fulfilled the inclusion criteria established in that section – in that they all:

- Are designed for the context of multi-faith Religious Education in England and Wales

- Put the role of belief in the divine (or ultimate reality in Teece's case) in the study of at least one theistic religion at the centre of learning in RE
- Enable students to gain insights into key concepts, teachings as well as practices relating to belief in the divine/ultimate reality in the religion(s) studied
- Whilst also having a certain interreligious potential – either in the sense that they were specifically designed for use in relation to multiple theistic religions or claim to be applicable to religions other than the one in which they are rooted (Christianity).

As my analysis will show, another reason why I am concentrating on these three examples in this chapter is that they all reveal different aspects (or combinations of different aspects) of a potential incompatibility with the principles and values of non-confessional RE. These range from: lack of applicability to religions other than Christianity in theory and/or practice; lack of actual cross-religious practical application; questionable underlying approaches to RS such as essentialist/relativist tendencies; use of a single interpretive lens and conception of religion through which to approach all (theistic) religions, etc. (A more detailed summary of these shortcomings will follow in section 3.6 of this chapter.)

Before considering the first example of a theology-centred approach fulfilling these criteria – Cooling's concept-cracking – I need to clarify, however, what I mean by the terms 'confessional', 'non-confessional' and the potentially related risk of 'indoctrination' in the context of the present study. This is necessary because the attribute 'non-confessional' is central to the second (emergent) hypothesis introduced in chapter 1 stating that the apparent compatibility problem, mentioned above, is currently shaping discussions about the relationship between theology and *non-confessional* RE, but could be avoided, entirely, by providing a new (e.g. content-based and possibly, interreligious) view of theology in this educational context. However, so far in this thesis (given the nature of introductory chapters), we have not had the opportunity to start a more in-depth discussion of different interpretations of the confessional/non-confessional distinction in RE, let alone provide any working definitions. Hence, this will be the task of the next section.

## 3.1 Non-Confessional Versus Confessional: Defining the Terms with Regard to Questions of Indoctrination in Multi-Faith RE

To offer definitions of the terms 'confessional'/'non-confessional' relevant to the context of RE, this section attempts to distinguish these attributes not just from one another, but also from related notions including 'indoctrination' and 'spiritual nurture'. For this, it might help to begin by providing a very generic, linguistically focused interpretation of the adjective 'confessional' – namely as a notion derived from the Latin *confiteri* (acknowledge), consisting, in turn, of the prefix *con-* (expressing intensive force and 'togetherness') and *fateri* (declare, avow), in short: to declare, together, with joint strength or vehemence. In the context of religion, confessionalism can thus be defined as a declaration of the total acceptance or assent to a religious teaching (doctrine), and confessional RE could be interpreted, linguistically, as a confession of faith on behalf of the teacher and students.

Unfortunately, though, this term as well as similar notions such as 'indoctrination', 'evangelisation', 'proselytisation', 'catechism' and 'nurture' have led to some confusion in RE research as they are sometimes not clearly distinguished from one another, or have been used in different ways by different scholars of Religious Education/Religious Studies (see Barnes, 2007b; Hand, 2018; Hull, 2004; Snook, 1972, 1976). It is therefore helpful to look at the following definitions and distinctions that have been offered. John Hull, for example, differentiates between the concepts of indoctrination and evangelisation in RE (Hull, 2004). For him, *indoctrination* includes the three components of 'content, intention and result' (Hull, 2004, 10). First, the content of indoctrination is doctrines, which are, in turn, distinct from customs on the grounds that it is possible to socialise people into the latter, but not the former. Second, the intention of the person who indoctrinates is 'to disguise the controversial status of the doctrine from the learner by presenting the doctrine as though it was a fact', which is why indoctrination leads to 'irrational commitment to the truth of the doctrine' on the part of the indoctrinated. And third, the result of such attempts at indoctrination can either be successful or unsuccessful because only those acts of indoctrination whose content is appropriate and whose intention to produce irrational commitment remains hidden, will not fail in the end (Hull, 2004, 10). This, Hull claims, is different from *evangelisation* because people who evangelise do not share the indoctrinator's intention to form an irrational commitment to doctrine but employ evangelising techniques – however close to indoctrination – through which to persuade, rather than force, people to follow their teachings or way of thinking (Hull, 2004, 11). Moreover, Hull explains, evangelisation can easily be distinguished from 'processes intended to deepen faith', such as *catechesis* (in the Roman Catholic tradition) and *nurturing belief* (in Protestantism) (see for example: Bushnell, 1975, 1979; Durka, 1995). Whilst catechising and nurturing are aimed at insiders of the given faith traditions, evangelising seeks to present a particular religious faith to outsiders of that tradition 'so as to persuade or convert them' to the given religion (Hull, 2004, 11). Further differentiations are offered by John Wilson (in Snook, Ed., 1972) and Ivan A. Snook (1972) who both have analysed the terms 'indoctrination' and 'brainwashing', which are often used interchangeably in everyday language. What distinguishes indoctrination from *brainwashing*, according to Wilson, is that even though the former causes people to believe in something that is irrational, they still hold these beliefs with meaning, which cannot be said of those who have simply been conditioned into following a creed or ideology through the power of brainwashing (in Snook, 1972, 10, 20). In this context, Snook also points to the fact that the methods of brainwashing tend to be more radical in the sense that those who use them will not shy away from strategies such as drug use, scaremongering, distortions of truth, isolation, etc. (Snook, 1972, 107).

Another way of looking at indoctrination is through the lens of students' autonomy – or lack thereof, to be exact. In a recent conference paper, Kevin Mott-Thornton has criticised definitions of indoctrination, here in the context of faith schools, when these focus too narrowly on the (ir-)rationality of the beliefs that are promoted in such confessional settings (Mott-Thornton, 2019, 1). He points to the following example: Michael Hand defines indoctrination as any educational act that teaches 'propositions as true, or standards as justified, when there is reasonable disagreement about them' (see Hand, 2018, 76). This rationalistic view of indoctrination, however, although adequate, perhaps, for evaluating 'propositions about the nature and workings of the material world', is not very useful when it comes to examining beliefs that are more practice-related, determining how someone should live their life, for instance (Mott-Thornton, 2019, 1). In such a case, where the focus is not on scientific facts but on the personal formation of students, Mott-Thornton argues, the decisive factor in indoctrinatory teaching or schooling, more generally, is not whether it leads students to adopt irrational beliefs (thereby undermining their rational autonomy), but whether the beliefs they adopt/develop in school have a normative dimension that restricts their 'situated autonomy' (Mott-Thornton, 2019, 3). Common conceptions of indoctrination, he claims, fail to acknowledge this:

> 'For a large class of beliefs, i.e. all beliefs with a normative dimension, it is not the rationality of the belief itself or whether there is controversy around that belief which

> determines the issue of indoctrination, but rather something like its formative appropriateness for any particular child given their particular social and cultural context. This important fact is not recognised by currently prevalent characterisations of indoctrination. We need therefore to broaden our conception of indoctrination beyond criteria based on the protection of rational open-mindedness and incorporate a reference to the development of situated but critically open autonomy.' (Mott-Thornton, 2019, 3)

The characterisation of indoctrination Mott-Thornton therefore suggests is '*any teaching where the prerequisites of situated autonomy for any particular child are intentionally or unintentionally undermined or contravened*' (Mott-Thornton, 2019, 3, emphasis in the text). Autonomy is certainly an important aspect to consider in the discussion about indoctrination in schools. It should be noted, though, that this definition, focusing on students' 'situated autonomy' in particular, does not give reason to draw any causal links between potential cases of such indoctrination and a student's moral or religious education and the given, i.e. confessional/non-confessional setting in which it takes place.

To circumvent the difficult task of defining each of the above terms, explicitly, and relating them to one another at this stage of the discussion, I shall therefore propose a simpler and more general way of distinguishing between confessional and non-confessional Religious Education. Although more detailed exploration of the debate about the confessional/non-confessional distinction will be important in later chapters of this thesis[31], the following, somewhat simplified definition of the terms is appropriate for now as it gives us sufficient insight into key aspects of the two corresponding categories of RE to complete the task at hand: the critical analysis of three examples of theology-centred approaches. Returning to the insider/outsider dichotomy mentioned in chapter 1 (sections 1.1 and 1.5) and concentrating on this aspect only, it is possible to suggest that confessional RE approaches the study of religion in schools, methodologically, *from within* one specific religion or denomination (which was usually Christian, before 1970) or has strong ideological links to any type of religious or spiritual worldview, whereas non-confessional RE employs methods that seek to study different religions *from an outsider's position*, that is without adopting or promoting a particular religious perspective. (As already specified in the introduction, in the context of this study, it is useful to include in the former category those approaches to Religious Education that claim to be religiously non-specific, e.g. in that they transcend the level of individual religions but presuppose the certainty of God's existence, such as universalist or religiously pluralist perspectives.) It should be made clear, though, that the issue of insider and outsider positions (e.g. of teachers and students) in the study of religions in schools is far more complex than could be captured in a simple dichotomy such as the one chosen here as a working definition for the present chapter. A closer examination, and in fact criticism, of simple binary oppositions of the categories 'insider' and 'outsider' in the context of religion will follow in chapter 4, section 4.1.4. For now, it suffices to specify that I am using the local attributes 'inside' and 'outside' simply to describe different methodological lenses from which the study of religion(s) can be approached in schools (i.e. from within or from outside of any specific religious tradition). This, however, does not imply that personal positionalities of the people using these approaches can or should be equally distinguished in this overly simplistic, binary way. What might therefore be important to stress is that non-confessional RE, as understood in the present study, should adopt its 'outsider' position only at the level of *methodology*, whilst allowing students to approach the content they encounter in RE from any *personal perspective* (religious or non-religious) they wish.[32] The question as to whether either of the two forms of Religious Education – confessional/non-confessional – indoctrinates, and if so, what content the act of indoctrination conveys and for which purpose, is one that needs further consideration (see chapter 5). Keeping this simple differentiation in mind, however, we should be sufficiently prepared for an examination and evaluation of existing theology-centred approaches to multi-faith RE with regard to the question of compatibility with the non-confessional nature of this subject.

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[31] Important aspects of this discussion such as interpretations of confessional theology as 'faith seeking understanding' and the question of faith requirement in theology will be considered more closely in the contexts of religious/theological understanding and the role of theology in the development of students' religious literacy in chapters 4 and 5.

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[32] For a more detailed discussion of the important distinction between *methodological* and *personal* insider/outsider perspectives in the context of non-confessional RE, see section 6.2.

## 3.2 Cooling's (Revelation-Centred) Concept-Cracking Strategy

Use of the concept-cracking strategy in RE goes back to Trevor Cooling's work on the Association of Christian Teachers' Stapleford Project in the 1990s. This project tried to counter the perceived tendency of previous pedagogical approaches (i.e. phenomenological/experiential RE; compare section 1.2) to allow secular educational concerns to determine the aims and outcomes of Religious Education, which arguably contributed to an increasingly instrumental view of the subject[33] (Cooling, 1994b). Especially phenomenologically influenced pedagogies, so Cooling argues, have imposed onto RE liberal religious ideologies which are rooted in politically motivated, outsider approaches to the study of religions and hence, stand in sharp contrast with the self-understanding of the religions studied and specifically, more conservative forms of religious belief (Cooling, 1994b, 3-5). He also criticises phenomenological approaches for being 'overly descriptive' and incapable of connecting students with the authentic meaning of religious belief, that is belief as it is understood, lived and experienced by insiders of religious traditions. As a consequence, Cooling contends, students merely gather factual information about the world religions without developing a feeling for what it means to be religious for religious adherents, let alone understanding how any of this, including RE itself, could be relevant to their own lives (Cooling, 1994b, 4). To counter these trends in multi-faith Religious Education, Cooling's main objective is therefore to help students explore the meaning of religion *for believers* and show its 'relevance to modern children' (Cooling, 1994b, 4). It is important to note, though, that the hermeneutical programme Cooling provides for the purpose of realising this goal restricts itself to the study of Christianity, which can be seen as a result of the Christian project's desire to adhere to the self-understanding and identity of insiders of religion.

With regard to learning about Christianity, Cooling claims, educators should realise that students have a right not just to learn about Christian beliefs and doctrine at an informative level, but also to understand how adherents of the Christian religion hold these beliefs as claims upon their lives and thus experience them every day, both as individuals and as a faith community (Cooling, 1996, 170-173). Grimmitt sees this as a reflection of Cooling's Christian realist position 'that the theological beliefs of the Christian faith community constitute an objective and authoritative *revelation* of God as disclosed through scripture and tradition, and that such beliefs cohere within a theological framework and are interpreted and understood by reference to Christian doctrine' (Cooling, 1996, 170; Grimmitt, 2000, 40, my emphasis). This is why Cooling's approach can be described as 'revelation-centred': given the unique, special nature of Christian scripture, Cooling argues, it is important that those who construct the RE curriculum also preserve the 'integrity of the religious material' studied, which requires them to be sensitive to the meaning and status the material has for insiders of the religious tradition (Cooling, 1996, 173). Cooling is therefore convinced that faith communities should generally influence the content selection of RE material, identifying, for example, the 'key teachings' around which to build the 'interpretive framework' to be used for the study of each religion (Cooling, 1996, 174).

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[33] Compare criticisms of Grimmitt's human development model for RE (M. Grimmitt, 1987). (For a more in-depth discussion of the problem of instrumentalization in the context of RE, see chapter 4.)

The methodological tool most central to this approach is the practice of 'concept-cracking' (Cooling, 1994b). Applied to the Christian tradition, it involves finding parallels between Christian beliefs and students' experiences by relating central concepts such as forgiveness, love and humility to the learners' everyday experiences and examining their potential significance. Using the concept-cracking strategy in the classroom involves four interrelated steps. First, teachers need to *unpack* with their students those concepts which they identify as central to a given topic or story. To be able to help students develop an understanding of the meaning and significance of the concepts, it is therefore necessary for teachers to know their subject matter very well (in this case, especially Christian theology), and be clear about common interpretations of the concepts (Cooling, 2000, 156-157). Second, teachers need to *select one or two concepts* as the focus for the lesson. This step requires them to analyse the significance and systematic relationship between the concepts relevant to the topic/story and choose the most central one(s) thus preventing students from getting confused by too much input (Cooling, 2000, 157). In the third step, teachers must find a way to *engage with the students' world of experience*. The key to employing this step successfully, Cooling explains, is to 'find parallels in the pupils' world' which relate to the chosen concept(s). This can be done by asking students to give examples of past situations, feelings, events, etc. they once experienced in their own lives and that they think might share commonalities with the topic or story discussed. The purpose of this step is to 'build the bridge between the students' world and the religious concept' (Cooling, 2000, 158; compare Jackson's use of the term 'bridge-building' in the process of 'edification'[34]). And the final step encourages students to *relate to the concept(s)* studied, approaching it/them from their own world of experience and identifying, perhaps, how aspects of the concept(s) could be relevant to their lives, independent of whether they are religious or not. At this stage, teachers should focus primarily on providing students with opportunities to express their own views about the topic, story and themes they encountered (e.g. in the form of diary entries or letters) and to reflect on their own position in this (Cooling, 2000, 158).

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[34] See Jackson (1997). *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach*. Hodder and Stoughton.

Cooling's approach shares similarities with other pedagogical models already considered in this thesis (see sections 1.1 and 1.2). Thus, it is evident, for example, that the hermeneutical process of concept-cracking, with its stress on the centrality of Christian theology in the first and second steps, and its strong focus on students' personal experiences in the third and fourth steps, incorporates ideas of Christian experientialism, in particular Douglas S. Hubery's developmental approach to concept formation of the 1960s (Hubery, 1960). Moreover, Grimmitt (2000, 41) argues (in his analysis of Cooling) that there are strong links between the ideas of building bridges/relating to religious concepts and the practice of 'learning from' religion, proposed by Grimmitt and Read (1977) in their two-fold model of learning about/learning from religion and further developed by Grimmitt (1987) in his human development model for RE.[35] In both cases, one might argue, students are encouraged to discover areas of overlap between their own life worlds and the religious content they study, thus entering into a space where their beliefs, values and experiences may enter into resonance with the rich world of religion. Grimmitt summarises this as follows: even though, for Cooling, the most important learning outcome of RE should always be 'achieving accurate understanding of Christian beliefs' (so as to do justice to the self-understanding of Christian believers), the process of learning from religion is acceptable because it promotes students' moral and spiritual development (Grimmitt, 2000, 41). Moreover, recognising that students will gain in different ways from understanding Christianity, Cooling claims that learning from can take different forms and thus lead to different outcomes in students' development, including the possibility of religious conversion, which he simply views as 'a very radical form of learning from Christianity' (Cooling, 1996, 177; compare Grimmitt, 2000, 41). At a less radical level, however, Cooling argues, learning from can also take place when students learn 'something about themselves from Christianity without themselves having to be Christian' (Cooling, 1994b, 23).

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[35] In *Religious Education and Human Development: The Relationship Between Studying Religions and Personal, Social and Moral Education* (1987), Grimmitt defines learning about and learning from as follows:

> 'When I speak about students learning about religion, I am referring to what the pupils learn about 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'. (Grimmitt, 1987, 225)

Furthermore, Grimmitt explains, the process of learning from religion in RE involves two kinds of evaluation: personal and impersonal. Whereas *impersonal evaluation* takes place when students are able to 'distinguish and make critical evaluations of truth claims, beliefs and practices' of different religions and the phenomenon of religion as such; *personal evaluation* requires them to confront and assess religious beliefs and values as part of a wider 'process of self-evaluation' (Grimmitt, 1987, 226).

Yet (returning to the main focus of this study – the question of compatibility), given the Stapleford's Project's strong focus on Christian faith and practice, one might question the degree to which this approach can be evaluated as appropriate for the context of non-confessional, multi-faith RE, defined here as a practice that approaches the study of religion(s) from a methodological outsider's perspective that neither promotes nor reflects any kind of religious/spiritual agenda or worldview. One issue to raise in this context is whether or not (and if so, to what extent) the concept-cracking approach can be applied to religions other than Christianity. Cooling himself argues that the Stapleford method could theoretically be used for the study of other religions but sees members of these traditions as much better suited to put such a plan into practice, which is why he makes no attempt to propose any non-Christian examples or practical applications of his pedagogy to other traditions (Cooling, 1994b, 2000). It could be questioned, however, if concentrating on revelation is at all useful to the study of non-Abrahamic religions, and if concept-cracking outside the context of Christian theology and doctrine would be fruitful. Regarding the topic of furthering theological understanding(s) of different theistic religions, we may therefore conclude that, while concept-cracking, as envisioned in the Stapleford Project, certainly has the potential to contribute to students' understanding(s) of Christian theology and theological concepts in particular, more research needs to be done to clarify if and how this approach could be conceptualised to include consideration of other religions in a way that does justice to *their* self-identity and perception. (This issue will be considered in more detail again in the section about Narrative Theology below, as it is arguable that this pedagogical stance faces similar challenges.)

It should also be noted that an argument has recently been proposed to integrate aspects of Cooling's concept-cracking strategy with another Christian-focused, theology-centred approach to RE – the aforementioned Understanding Christianity project of the Church of

England Office (see, for example, Pett & Cooling, 2018). Drawing on Thiselton's (2009) concept of 'responsible hermeneutics', Pett and Cooling argue, earlier challenges levelled at the concept-cracking approach (namely, that it misrepresents Christianity as a unified set of beliefs rather than a 'living diversity'; for example), can be overcome by looking at the concept-cracking strategy through the two-fold hermeneutical lens ('hermeneutics of retrieval'/'hermeneutics of suspicion') of the new project (Pett & Cooling, 2018, 263). This, they argue, would enable students to be both insiders and outsiders in the hermeneutical process in that they come to understand core Christian ideas and ways of living (e.g. by interpreting Christian texts), whilst also retaining their integrity as learners within a secular society (Pett & Cooling, 2018, 264). As in the case of the Stapleford Project, however, it is difficult to see how this approach could be applied outside the context of Christian theology. Pett and Cooling reflect on this issue as well:

> 'The implications of this approach for the wider RE curriculum are under consideration. A study of Hinduism or of secular humanism could not retain the same emphasis on a specific written text, and the Qur'an may not be used in the same way in the classroom, perhaps. However, if "text" is used as it is by Gadamer and others, to apply beyond the written word to any object of study encountered by the pupil, the pupil's participation in the process of examining, interpreting and understanding the object of study, within the hermeneutical circle (…), has potential application beyond the study of Christianity in RE.' (Pett & Cooling, 2018, 266)

Whilst appreciating the argument for a broad definition of 'text' in the context of hermeneutics (one such interpretation will also be used in the present study; see sections 6.2.3 and 6.2.4), I would respond that such a view of cross-religious methodological applicability is not ideal. What both the Stapleford Project and Understanding Christianity seem to envision, with regard to the project of widening the two approaches to include, as objects of study, religions other than Christianity, is to adapt the given methodological model to the specific requirements of individual traditions. The result of such religion-specific adjustments, however, could be the creation of a set of separate approaches, each based on a slightly different set of criteria and principles for the study of the given tradition. In other words, rather than offering one methodology entitled 'Understanding Religions' (or a particular aspect of them, as the present study suggests, i.e. understanding theistic belief in different religious contexts), such a necessarily flexible solution would lead to the emergence of many methodologies – 'Understanding Christianity', 'Understanding Hinduism', 'Understanding Islam', etc. – which, in the end, may not be similar enough to be viewed as one overall methodology. With regard to the question of compatibility (with non-confessional, multi-faith RE), one would therefore have to assess each religion-specific interpretation of the 'Understanding…' approach individually, which would undoubtedly complicate the project of revivifying theology as a legitimate approach to Religious Education in religiously unaffiliated schools. As chapters 5 and 6 will demonstrate, the present study therefore promotes an alternative *interreligious*, and primarily *content-focused*, vision of theology that overcomes the apparent compatibility problem outlined above, precisely by being applicable to all theistic religions in the same way, that is without the requirement of any significant methodological modification.

## 3.3 Teece's Soteriological Framework for the Study of Religions

Before considering Teece's soteriological framework (2008, 2010c, 2012) as a potential manifestation of theology-centred RE, I need to explain more thoroughly why I use Teece's work as an example here, despite the fact that it is not explicitly theology-centred since Teece does not limit himself to theistic religions. The main reason why I decided, nonetheless, to include this soteriological framework in the present chapter is that it can serve as an example of an interreligious theological approach, concerned specifically with the development of students' conceptual understandings of religions, if one applies it only to mono- and polytheistic traditions and excludes (for the purpose of this study only) non-theistic religions and non-religious worldviews. The reason is simple: as we will see, Teece proposes a systematic (i.e. soteriologically focused) study of key concepts related to ultimate Reality or transcendence in individual traditions. In the case of theistic traditions, that Reality can arguably be identified as God, gods or the divine (more generally), which means that the main concepts studied within these religions are automatically theological ones or have, at least, theological relevance in that they are all connected to the believer's orientation towards that divine reality. My limited application of Teece's proposition to theistic religions only, thus *makes it*, so to speak, a theology-centred approach, at least in this specific instance. That said, I will start my presentation and analysis of Teece's work by looking at one of the main motivations behind it.

The soteriological framework promoted by Teece as a useful tool for the study of religions in schools can be seen as the result of an in-depth philosophical exploration of the question: 'how can Religious Education be *religious* in character, whilst also being non-confessional, focused on different religions, and appropriate for schools without a religious affiliation?' (Teece, 2005, 2010a; Walshe & Teece, 2013). His main aim is to provide a possibility to re-define the curriculum identity of RE, currently shaped by confusion about the various aims and purposes assigned to the subject (see Conroy et al., 2013; Ofsted, 2010), in a way that does justice to the religious component in the subject's title. For Teece, this requires that the methodological approaches, teaching strategies, and interpretive frameworks chosen in Religious Education should on the whole enable the subject to form an identity that makes it distinctive from other, related disciplines (such as Anthropology, Sociology or Psychology) and the respective methods these disciplines use to approach religious subject matter in their subject-specific ways (Teece, 2010c, 11).

A good way of securing such a distinctive subject identity for RE, Teece argues, is by drawing upon the resources of soteriology in general and John Hick's soteriological interpretation of religion in particular, including his pluralist hypothesis that the world religions are, as far as we can tell, different culture-specific responses to the *noumenon* or 'ineffable Real', all possessing salvific potential, albeit not necessarily to the same extent (Hick, 1973, 1989; Teece, 2005, 2008, 2010a). What students may gain from adopting Hick's soteriological lens in RE, according to Teece, is an understanding of religions as 'human responses to the transcendent'. As Teece explains, the starting point for the development of such an understanding can be found in Hick's Irenaean intuition that all post-axial religious traditions tend to interpret the human condition as unsatisfactory in its essence and therefore, in need of transformation. From this perspective, human beings who search for spiritual transformation through one of the pathways offered by the religions of this world all have something in common: they 'aim to overcome a self-, or ego-centred, life in relation to a supreme object of value' which promises, depending on the given religion, either spiritual salvation or liberation (Teece, 2012, 257). Religions can therefore be interpreted as different cultural responses to the same ultimate reality, providing (potentially) equally valid paths to salvation/liberation, although Hick allows for the possibility that religions may vary in their salvific efficiency (Hick, 1989, 210). However, the crucial point about Hick's Philosophy of Religion, which has far-reaching implications both for religious believers and students of religion, is that he assumes no one religious tradition can ever have the complete truth about the ultimate reality it responds to, simply because this reality is beyond human comprehension. This makes it recommendable, if not 'wise (…) for religious believers to look to other traditions to inform and complement their own' and invites students to look at the core theological/religious concepts of individual religions, draw conceptual links between religious traditions, compare and contrast them, thus developing an understanding of the phenomenon of religion as a whole (Teece, 2012, 257).

If we concentrate on Sikhism as an example, such a concept-orientated, soteriological understanding – put into narrative form – could be summarised as follows (Sikhism is a particularly useful example because its key concept, *gurmukh* or God-centredness is closely related to Hick's notion of Reality-centredness; hence, my choice of this example.)

- The reason why Sikhs tend to regard human existence as unsatisfactory is that it involves suffering, which is caused by our spiritual blindness – *avidya*. Moreover, *avidya* and *maya* (illusion) cause the condition known as *haumai*, which means ego-,

> or self-centredness. A person who is subject to *haumai* is described as *manmukh*, someone who focuses on the self rather than the great Guru or God. According to Guru Nanak, the first guru in the line of the ten living gurus of Sikhism, it is *haumai* which controls human beings to such an extent that it binds them more firmly to the wheel of transmigration. To achieve liberation, Sikhs must therefore follow a path of *nam simran* (the practice of keeping God constantly in mind) and *sewa* (selfless service) and develop the spiritual condition of *gurmukh* (God-centredness), which ultimately leads to the state of *mukhti* or liberation. (Summary based, loosely, on Teece, 2012, 261-262)

This reveals that, in contrast to Cooling's concept-cracking (section 3.2), Teece's explanatory framework is deliberately designed for the study of different religions, which provides students with a methodological tool to approach various (e.g. theistic) traditions in a clearly structured way, thereby opening up possibilities for later comparisons (e.g. of conceptual similarities and differences) and personal reflection on recurring religious themes and issues.[36] It should also be evident that such an approach to the study of religions can be classified as theology-centred if applied to a theistic tradition such as Sikhism. Here, I would point to the fact that the central concept of *gurmukh* means being centred on God and the practice of *nam simran* concerns itself with keeping God constantly in mind, while all other concepts and teachings explained are logically linked to this God-centredness. It could therefore be argued that using Teece's framework in RE may well have the potential to further students' understanding of theological content or might at least be a useful resource to draw from, especially when it comes to teaching theological content of different religions in a systematic and potentially comparative way.

However, one could question the extent to which this way of interpreting religions really constitutes an *approach to RE* since it does not say much about pedagogy or the RE curriculum in a broader sense after all. Although the soteriological framework can certainly be viewed as a useful tool for theology-centred content selection in multi-faith RE (which has the advantage of being applicable, without problems or theoretical inconsistencies, to all theistic religions), it is unclear what other educational benefits it would have. Thus, one might ask, for example: what exactly would children learn when studying a religion like

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[36] Practical examples of such a soteriology-centred, comparative approach, based on Teece, will be considered in Chapter 7, section 7.2.

Sikhism in this way, and how would this differ from old-style catechetical instruction, aimed primarily at knowledge transmission? Would children thus really develop a theological understanding or theological understanding(s) of the traditions explored through this method? And would this make them religiously literate (in relation to theistic religions)? These and other questions relating to Teece's framework will be investigated in more detail in the main discussion of transcendence-orientated theology in chapters 6 and 7 and, most notably, in section 7.2 where I will reconsider Teece's views in the context of issues of universality and particularity in Comparative Religion. The present analysis of this methodological proposition will therefore limit itself to a few central aspects and arguments in the relevant debates about soteriology-centred RE.

According to Teece, using the soteriological lens enables students to put human experience of spiritual transformation at the centre of academic study, whilst also inviting them to 'study religions critically and develop their understanding of what it means to be human in a religiously ambiguous world' (Hick, 1989; Teece, 2012, 257). In other words, what lies at the heart of religious understanding from this point of view is not a constant search for ultimate truth in an abstract, philosophical sense (a tendency one might find in critical realist approaches, for example[37]), but a gradual process of learning about religions in their individuality and thereby connecting students with the self-identity of these traditions, revealed, in turn, in their individual interpretations of spiritual transformation. According to Walshe and Teece (2013), this is what makes it possible to promote a 'religious' understanding of religions in multi-faith RE, which nevertheless is non-confessional and thus adequate for religiously unaffiliated schools. This approach to RE is *religious* because it promotes an understanding of 'the meaning of religions and beliefs' by teaching key concepts of different religions 'that define/describe the religiousness' of those traditions (Walshe & Teece, 2013, 8). And it is *non-confessional* in that it promotes 'an understanding of religions in their soteriological dimensions', rather than 'a soteriological understanding of religion' as expressed by insiders of a particular faith tradition (Walshe & Teece, 2013, 8).

Two main sorts of criticism (relevant to the research focus of the present study) can be brought against Teece's soteriological view of religions: those centring upon implications and questions raised by Hick's interpretation of religion – in the broader field of RS and the Philosophy of Religion in particular, and those focusing specifically on the context of primary/secondary education and Teece's Philosophy of Religious Education (that is, RE pedagogy). For many (see below), the problem with Hick's pluralist interpretation of religion lies in its tendency to reduce religious traditions to a common core by relativizing claims to finality and doctrinal truth, in order to provide an egalitarian account of religious diversity and peaceful interreligious relations. In this vein, Gavin D'Costa argues, Hick is able to shift the focus from potential conflicts in interreligious encounters to what he sees as common to all religions: human striving for Reality-centredness, which opens the way to 'loving compassion towards one's neighbour' (D'Costa, 1996, 227). Thus, it is possible to hold that all religions, like members of one family, are equal partners in dialogue and collaboration (Hick, 1973, 146; 1989, 3-5). Therefore, for constructive interfaith dialogue to take place, one might draw the rather controversial conclusion that participants in dialogue must simply concentrate on that which unites rather than separates them in their diversity, by ignoring the particularities of their religious beliefs and focusing on potential commonalities instead.

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[37] The views of critical realists such as Barnes and Wright (Barnes, 2006; Barnes & Wright, 2006; Wright, 1993) will be discussed in chapters 6 and 7, both in the context of my reconsideration of Teece's soteriological approach to RE with regard to questions of universality/particularity in the study of religions (section 7.2) as as well in relation to Strhan's theology-centred 'religious education otherwise' (Strhan, 2010) (section 6.1).

As I have summarised elsewhere (Pfaff, 2014), criticism against this view of interreligious relations comes from various academic fields:

> 'Philosophers of religion, assessing the extent to which pluralism can really be made normative, argue, for example, that it is implausible to make different expressions of the absolute, let alone complete religious languages, equivalent (Cottingham, 2005; D'Costa, 1996; Loughlin, 1990; Rowe, 1999; Ward, 2018). To show that one cannot make two unknown variables (such as different concepts of the absolute) identical, Keith Ward claims: 'it is rather like saying, "I do not know what X is; and I do not know what Y is; therefore, X must be the same as Y"' (Ward, 1990, 5). Others are concerned with ethical questions about the exercise of power that arise from pluralist worldviews. Talal Asad, for example, rejects the underlying assumption of Western religious pluralism that there is nothing wrong about the pluralist's desire 'to mould others in one's own image' (Asad, 1993, 12). Furthermore, it is questioned whether the concept behind pluralism, postulating religions as identifiable entities, is at all valid. Nicholas Lash, drawing on the historical analyses of Peter Harrison (1990) and Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1978), objects that the models used by Western pluralists to describe non-Christian religions have their origin in the rationalist deism of Western Enlightenment and are therefore hardly applicable to other traditions (Lash, 1996). Similarly, John Milbank argues that pluralism lacks a critical sense of itself as it ignores the possibility that its underlying ethical values are a 'product of Anglo-American empiricist rationality', which are simply imposed onto other cultures (Milbank, 1990, 175). And Tomoko Masuzawa even goes as far as to claim that the whole discourse of world religions, especially in the Phenomenology of Religion with its constant focus on the irreducible uniqueness of individual religious experience, is a hidden means to preserve European/Christian universalism, including traditional claims of intellectual superiority (Masuzawa, 2005). From this perspective, the pluralist's concern to provide an egalitarian account of religion by focusing on commonalities between religions results,

> whether intentionally or not, in ongoing suppression of that which is perceived as religiously different from Western Christianity.' (Pfaff, 2014, 18-19)

The main problem involved in Hick's Philosophy of Religion, one might claim, can therefore be identified as a general ignorance of the significance of difference within interreligious relations caused by the reductiveness of his unitary[38] version of pluralism. One of the first scholars who pointed this out was Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (1985). The most serious problem involved in pluralism, as he sees it, is that this theory (although having transformed the Christian salvation problematic from the question of *if* people from other faiths can be saved to reflections on *how* they might be, e.g. *despite* or *through* their non-Christian beliefs) still focuses too much on the salvation of the other while ignoring completely the theological significance of otherness[39] (MacIntyre, 1985, 205). In other words: by creating an artificial unity among all axial religious traditions that consciously ignores differences in belief, doctrine and practice, Hick's pluralism cannot encourage genuine dialogue, or lead to an in-depth understanding of different religions, as it fails to take otherness seriously in the first place. Similarly, Bernard MacGrane argues that religious pluralism opens the door to cultural relativism and therefore, trivialises encounters with people from other faith communities, which – in sharp contrast to its self-proclaimed intention – inevitably reaffirms 'the Eurocentric idea of the progress of knowledge' (MacGrane, 1989, 129) (compare Pfaff, 2014, 19).

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[38] Unitary pluralism is one of the three types of religious pluralism identified by D'Costa: *unitary pluralism* (exemplified most notably by Hick), *ethical pluralism* (Knitter, Pieris, Radford Ruether) and *pluriform pluralism* (Panikkar, Heim and Placher) (D'Costa, 2009). The aim of unitary pluralism, according to this categorisation, is to articulate an essential unity between the world religions by showing that they all share common beliefs (e.g. about the purpose of life), even if they are expressed, experienced and practised in different ways (D'Costa, 2009, 5). Ethical pluralism, in contrast, is more pragmatic in that it sees religions primarily as bearers of certain ethical codes aimed at the realisation of practical human goals such as social justice or environmental protection (D'Costa, 2009, 6). And finally, proponents of pluriform pluralisms do not see truth – in the context of religion – as unitary, but pluriform in the sense that all religious traditions, albeit unable to ever possess the whole truth, have some of it, thus being capable of transforming the others, e.g. by speaking to them on their own terms (D'Costa, 2009, 14).

Regarding the third category, Morris (2014) objects, however, that it is inappropriate to group together such diverse approaches to theological thinking about other religions because Heim and Placher clearly depart from the classical pluralisms of Hick and Panikkar and should hence be discussed separately (Morris, 2014, 87). Panikkar's pluralism, Morris claims, is still rather close to Hick's unitary pluralism in that it depends on the 'underlying notion that there is a unity to truth', towards which individual religions, possessing only a part, may be seen to be working incessantly (Morris, 2014, 98). With special regard to soteriological questions, Heim therefore criticises that classical pluralists including Panikkar cannot affirm a plurality of different approaches to salvation, homogenising instead various religious beliefs and practices into a unified whole (Heim, 1995, 129-131). Heim and Placher, in contrast, redefine pluralistic notions of salvation insofar as they do not see them as 'partial perspectives on a single truth', but 'as a way of speaking about multiple realities, multiple truths and multiple ends' that need not be reduced to a common core (Morris, 2014, 99). (This footnote consists of an extract from the literature review of my Master's dissertation: *Interfaith Dialogue and the Significance of Difference: Considering Legenshausen's Non-reductive Pluralism as a Basis for Muslim-Christian Dialogue*see Pfaff, 2014, 14-15).

[39] Similar points regarding the theological significance of otherness have been made by Tracy (1994) and Dupuis (1997).

Numerous replies to these criticisms have been put forward by scholars of religion and philosophers in the past thirty years, especially with regard to the questions of whether Hick's pluralist interpretation of religion should really be viewed as reductive and relativistic. Although providing a detailed analysis of these responses exceeds the scope of this thesis, I will return to some of these counter-arguments in my closer consideration of Teece's Hick-influenced soteriological framework for RE in chapter 7 (section 7.2) which will concentrate on the task of balancing issues of universality and particularity in the comparative study of theistic religions. This final chapter will also examine, explicitly, those criticisms of Teece that relate directly to multi-faith Religious Education at school level, as opposed to Religious Studies, more generally. For now, I will only include a brief hint at the main content of this RE-specific debate.

A criticism, which relates to the problem of Eurocentrism in RS, but is more concerned with Religious Education than the Philosophy of Religion in its broader sense, comes from the perspective of Critical Realism. Barnes and Wright (2006) argue, that Teece's approach involves a new type of indoctrination that is just as damaging to the subject of RE as the traditional Christian confessionalism (of the 1940s to 60s) which it was meant to replace. From their perspective, Teece's soteriological framework is also inadequate for the context of multi-faith RE because it preaches the virtues of Western liberal Protestantism to the exclusion of more traditional exclusivist or inclusivist interpretations of religion[40], which makes it as equally confessional as earlier Christian denominational approaches (Barnes & Wright, 2006, 65-67). Barnes and Wright are convinced this liberal confessionalism has been expressed in various ways: first, in the phenomenological methodologies of the 1970s which often 'stressed description of religious phenomena over active engagement with para-historical truth-claims'; then, in the experiential approaches of the 1970s-1990s which concentrated primarily on private experience rather than public aspects of religion; and more recently, in the type of 'spiritual religious education' promoted by Teece (Barnes & Wright, 2006, 67). So, the main problem they identify in Teece's methodological approach is that, due to its inclination towards Hick's 'post-Enlightenment Romanticism' it keeps focusing on religious experience as a common way of knowing the Real, whilst ignoring the significance of conflicting truth claims and particular doctrines – in short, the irreducible differences that exist both between and within religions worldwide (Barnes & Wright, 2006, 71). What we may therefore conclude from this analysis at this stage of the discussion is that the main precondition any application of Teece's soteriological approach to theistic religions would need to fulfil (in order to be evaluated as suitable for the context of multi-faith RE) is the avoidance of the essentialism and religious/cultural relativism potentially involved in Hick's pluralist interpretation of religion. (For a closer examination of these issues, see section 7.2.)

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[40] See Race's threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism in *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (1982).

## 3.4 Reed and Freathy's Narrative Approach to Theology

Narrative Theology, or the narrative approach to theology in RE to be more precise, was developed by Esther Reed and Rob Freathy as part of a recent research project called 'The Art of Narrative Theology in Religious Education' (2011-2014). It can be regarded as a continuation of the Biblos Project conducted by Terrence Copley, Rob Freathy, and Karen Walshe at the University of Exeter in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Copley et al., 2004). The narrative project promotes a theology-centred approach to Religious Education that teaches the Christian Bible to Key Stage 3 students through the combined methods of Narrative Philosophy and Narrative Theology. Narrative theories, it is argued, are widely accepted in Christian theological circles as a constructive way of dealing with doctrines and practices of the Christian traditions. Thus, Frei, Hauerwas, Loughlin, Ford, Stroup, Stiver, Green and Thiselton all argue that, instead of viewing the Bible as a set of abstract moral principles, and faith communities as passive followers of them, it is much more useful to theologians to treat the Bible as a collection of stories expressing divine revelations through human history, and to see communities as the 'living stories' in which these Biblical narratives are interpreted both from communal and individual perspectives (Ford, 1997; Frei, 1974, 1975; Green, 2007; S. Hauerwas, 1983, 2001; S. Hauerwas & Burrell, 1997; Loughlin, 1996; Stiver, 2001; Stroup, 1997; Thiselton, 2007). In a similar way, Reed and Freathy's Narrative Theology in RE 'understands individuals and communities as formed by reading, sharing and living within stories' (a fundamental assumption of Narrative Philosophy) and proposes a similar narrative understanding of Christian communities and the Biblical texts upon which they are founded, thereby offering the basis for a narrative understanding of Christianity (see Exeter University website: Network for Religion in Public Life – The Art of Narrative Theology in Religious Education).

In this way, Freathy et al. claim, students may learn to see the Bible not as a set of fixed rules or moral and/or theological principles, but rather 'as a collection of stories or narratives, each of which tells us something about what Christians believe to be the revelation of God throughout history' (Freathy, Reed, & Davis, 2014, 2). When taken as a whole, these stories may then be understood as forming an 'overarching Bible story', telling Christians the grand narrative of 'God's on-going salvation of humankind' (Freathy et al., 2014). Narrative Theology thus responds to current approaches to Christian ethics[41] in RE that treat Biblical texts mainly as a sourcebook for ethical principles to be used by the students as textual evidence for differing religious positions in discussions of contemporary moral dilemmas – to do with such things as abortion, euthanasia or genetic engineering, for instance (Reed et al., 2013, 301; compare Strhan, 2010).[42] To counter such negative trends, the main aim of Narrative Theology is therefore to enable students to approach Biblical texts 'not as a quasi-philosophical collection of answers' to difficult ethical questions, but as 'narratives of how people have understood, and continue to understand, their relationship with God' (Reed et al., 2013, 302). At a practical level, so Reed et al. argue, this can be achieved if students engage in the following four phases of learning: 'encountering narrative; interpreting narrative; understanding narrative in community contexts; and reflecting on narrative of self and others' (Reed et al., 2013, 303).

At first glance, one could claim (regarding our topic of theology's role in the context of multi-faith RE) that it is somewhat unclear to what extent narrative approaches like this one can be applied to religions other than Christianity, which could arguably make them suitable for secular educational settings such as schools without a religious affiliation. This depends, among other things, on how we interpret 'narrative' and 'text' in the wider context of hermeneutics (compare, for example, Thiselton's theory of 'responsible hermeneutics' considered in the context of Understanding Christianity in section 3.2). If we define narrative/text in a narrow sense to refer only to scriptural sources and written story in particular, there might be some scope for including the holy scriptures of the two non-Christian Abrahamic traditions, Judaism and Islam, as objects of study in a narrative approach to RE. This argument could be further supported by the fact that revelation has a special status in all Abrahamic monotheisms. Reed et al. claim: Abrahamic religions should first and foremost be seen as narratives of faith, which in the case of Christianity means, 'a set of stories that tell about the *revelation* of God through history and of God's redemptive love for humankind' (Reed et al., 2013, 299, my emphasis). However, since the notion of revelation is central to Judaism and Islam as well[43], one could open this Christian-specific interpretation of scripture in the light of divine revelation to the two other traditions and hence suggest that a narrative reading of God's involvement in the world, *and revelation in human history*, might illuminate students' theological understanding not just in relation to Christianity, but – even if not to all religious traditions – at least to the three Abrahamic religions.

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[41] Examples of approaches to Christian ethics that use the Bible for 'proof-texting' can be found in the third edition of the GCSE textbook *Contemporary Moral Issues* (Jenkins, 1997, 96) and the A-level resource *A Student's Guide to AS Religious Studies for the OCR Specification* (Wilcockson, 2008, 82). The survey of RE content at Key Stage 4 in 19 Agreed Syllabuses, conducted by Copley and his team in 2001, *Does RE Work?*, and the DCSF report about materials used to teach about world religions hint at similar developments in the recent history of RE (Copley et al., 2001; Department for Children Schools and Families, 2010).

[42] Similar issues have recently been raised by Robert Bowie and Richard Coles (2018) and Susan Docherty (2018).

It is important to stress, though, that such a narrow interpretation of text (as scripture) and scripture (as divine revelation) is not the basis of Reed and Freathy's approach to RE since their narrative project, as explained above, incorporates aspects of both Narrative Theology and *Narrative Philosophy*. Thus, they make clear a distinction between, and recognise the significance of (i) 'narrative philosophy which is inclusive of all people irrespective of their religious or secular worldviews and which is therefore universal in scope and application' and (ii) 'a narrative understanding of both the Christian community and of the Biblical texts upon which that community is based' (Reed et al., 2013, 299). The former (broader) view is important because, otherwise, it would be difficult to see how the narrative approach to theology could be extended to non-Abrahamic theistic traditions in a fruitful way. There might be a case for interpreting Hindu scriptures of the *shruti* category such as the four Vedas in the light of divine revelation and involvement in the cosmos in similar ways to Abrahamic texts since these Hindu scriptures are commonly classified as 'heard' or 'revealed' through direct experience (*anhubhava*) without human authorship, as opposed to *smrti*, 'remembered'. Yet, it is difficult to see how such a revelation-centred, multi-faith version of Narrative Theology could ultimately defend itself from the charge of being geared towards Abrahamic monotheism in its approach to Hindu polytheistic traditions.

For these reasons, it is crucial to understand that Freathy and Reed's conception of 'narrative' does not only involve written stories, let alone stories that consist of clearly identifiable plotlines, characters and places, but also what could be called the 'broader narratives of faith', which includes the lives and self-understanding(s) of religious people as defined by the individual or a community; religious hymns, prayers, material artworks, places of worship, etc., in short: anything that expresses a worldview from a particular faith perspective. Promoting narratives of life, the universe and everything, all religions (whether

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[43] Orthodox Jews, like Christians and Muslims, believe that the Torah was received from Yahweh on Mount Sinai; Muslims believe the Qur'an was revealed by God to Muhammad through the angel *Jibrīl* (Gabriel).

Abrahamic or non-Abrahamic) can hence be described as possessing a narrative dimension that can be studied by students of RE through the methods of Narrative Theology/Philosophy – albeit, perhaps, in slightly different ways, depending on the respective religious tradition.

This potential need for differentiation, however, raises similar questions to the ones we encountered in the context of Cooling's latest attempts to integrate his concept-cracking strategy with the hermeneutics of Understanding Christianity (see section 3.2). Even though Narrative Theology, as proposed by Reed and Freathy, might have the capability of being applied more broadly (here: to all theistic and non-theistic religions), it is unclear how the specific Christian example provided in The Art of Bible Reading Project could ultimately be translated, both in terms of theory and practice, into different religious contexts. Key questions to ask are, for example: when might the religion-specific origins of a theological/theoretical framework prohibit its application to new domains? How can students who do not have a theistic faith nevertheless engage with theistic belief through Narrative Theology? How far can the underlying pedagogical principles and procedures suggested for the context of Christianity be legitimately applied to the study of other theistic faiths and the relationships between them? Etc. A major shortcoming of this approach, one could therefore conclude, is that (like Cooling's Stapleford Project), it claims to be designed in such a way to be extendable to religions other than Christianity; this *theoretical* universal applicability, however, has neither been tested in practice so far, nor are there any detailed descriptions of how such a non-Christian application might look like in theory/practice.

Moreover, another, much more general, objection to the narrative approach in RE might be that it imposes an external and hence, somewhat *alien*, theoretical framework upon religious traditions that do not necessarily conceive of themselves in narrative terms. Drawing upon literary genres such as narration/story, one might even suspect that the narrative approach to the study of religion(s) in schools involves the risk of placing religious belief in the realm of fiction, which could reinforce the impression many non-religious students already have that religion has nothing to do with real life, let alone the realities of their own experiences (for a closer consideration of this problem see, for example, Freathy & Aylward, 2010). In this context, it could also be questioned how helpful it is to promote an approach to the study of religions employing a single conceptualisation of religions/worldviews and associated phenomena, here: as narrative(s), rather than integrating such a methodological lens within a broader interdisciplinary and multi-methodological approach to RE. Focusing on the example of the RE-searchers' approach (Freathy et al., 2015), the following section will show why such an integrative version of Narrative Theology might be more recommendable, especially if it pursues the goal of overcoming the compatibility problem that is thought to exist between theology and multi-faith Religious Education.

## 3.5 Narrative Theology in Freathy and Freathy's 'RE-Searchers': An Interdisciplinary, Multi-Methodological Approach

In *The RE-searchers: A New Approach to RE in Primary Schools* (2015), Giles Freathy and Rob Freathy, in cooperation with Geoff Teece, Karen Walshe and Jonathan Doney, have recently put forward a new critical, dialogic and enquiry-based multi-methodological approach to RE, designed to counter the methodological one-sidedness of many existing approaches by offering both teachers and students a possibility to engage 'with the diversity of dialogues that form the heterogeneous multi-disciplinary fields of theological and Religious Studies' (R. Freathy & G. Freathy, 2013a, 161). In contrast to other pedagogies, it does not only focus on academic knowledge and understanding of the beliefs and practices of different religions which can be approached from a variety of methodological perspectives, but also teaches students 'the disciplinary knowledge and skills associated with the communities of academic practice concerned with Religious Studies' – in short, research methods themselves (R. Freathy & G. Freathy, 2013a, 159). Originally designed for the context of primary education, this multi-methodological approach introduces, in an age-appropriate and rather playful manner, a number of fictional cartoon characters called 'the RE-searchers' which represent different methodological approaches: Ask-It-All Ava (Phenomenology of Religion); Debate-It-All Derek (Critical Realism, Philosophy of Religion); Have-A-Go Hugo (experience-based learning) and See-The-Story Suzie (Narrative Theology).[44]

The RE-searchers' approach can also be seen as a logical continuation of earlier enquiry-based pedagogies such as the ones promoted by Vivienne Baumfield (2005) and Paul Vermeer (2012), as it combines the general idea that students should learn how to participate in the sort of academic enquiry which gives rise to knowledge about religion(s) with the specific suggestion that 'both teachers and students need to engage in fruitful dialogue not only about what is taught in RE and why (i.e. contents and aims), but also how (i.e. methods)' (R. Freathy & G. Freathy, 2013a, 159). This has the advantage that it opens students the door to knowledge about knowing and learning – in short, metacognition. Donald Meichenbaum defines this term as a person's awareness of his or her 'own cognitive machinery and how the machinery works' (Meichenbaum, Burland, Gruson, & Camerson in Yussen, 1985). This metacognitive knowledge could hence be described as a form of higher-order thinking, by which students learn to monitor, evaluate and regulate their own cognitive processes such as remembering, understanding, problem-solving and learning (Brown, Bransford, Ferrara, & Campione, 1983; Metcalfe & Shimamura, 1996; Morris, 1990). As I have argued elsewhere:

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[44] The next three paragraphs consist of (to some extent, paraphrased) extracts from earlier coursework in which I undertook an action research related to the RE-searchers' approach: Schmidt, A. (2015). Applying the RE-searchers' approach to Religious Education to Secondary Education at Key Stage 3 to prepare pupils for GCSE Religious Studies. PGCE Education and Professional Studies. University of Exeter.

> 'Students using the RE-searchers' approach, one might argue, develop a strong sense of *procedural* knowledge (knowing how to use particular strategies for learning) and *conditional* knowledge (knowing which strategy to use in which context (Bruning, Schraw, Norby, & Ronning, 2004) when they reflect upon the advantages and disadvantages of choosing one of the RE-searchers' characters for a particular research topic as part of the planning phase of their study, for example, or when they monitor their own learning by evaluating their academic choices after completing a task. One might therefore conclude that the multi-methodological approach offered by Freathy and Freathy has the potential of enabling students to develop a wealth of RE-specific knowledge, making use of basic and higher-level thinking skills, which eventually helps them to become experts in the field of Religious Studies themselves.' (Schmidt, 2015, 7)

This also has the benefit of enabling insider and outsider perspectives of faith to coexist in Religious Education, without risking prioritising one over the other, let alone indoctrinating one understanding of religion only. Freathy and Freathy use their interpretations of Rachel Cope's (2013) and Julian Stern's (2013) opposing theories of hermeneutics in the study of religion to illustrate this point. The hermeneutical questions that arise from these two approaches and to which Freathy et al. respond can be summarised as follows: re-examining her distant interpretative approach to the study of the Shaker Revival Period (c. 1830-50) after attending and hence, *experiencing* a Shaker service for the first time, Cope chooses to promote 'a hermeneutics of trust, calling upon religious historians to suspend their disbelief and immerse themselves in the worldviews of those they are studying' (R. Freathy & G. Freathy, 2013a, 157), which can be interpreted as an example of an integrative phenomenological/experiential approach to Religious Studies (see Grimmitt, 2000). According to this view, the main objective of academic research would be to gain 'empathetic understanding of the meaning and interiority of human experience' by adopting an *emic* (insider's) perspective on the religious phenomenon studied (Cope in R. Freathy & G. Freathy, 2013a, 157). Stern, by contrast, argues that both *etic* and *emic* viewpoints, making researchers either doubtful or trustful of what they encounter in Religious Studies, can have benefits and shortcomings depending on the given historical, social or religious context. Rather than assuming that a 'hermeneutics of trust' is generally more valuable than 'a hermeneutics of doubt' (like the one underlying Critical Realism, for instance), Stern suggests it is better to understand the past in dialogue with the present and the worldviews of historical subjects in dialogue with those of the researcher (Stern, 2013). Research, in other words, can neither attain complete academic objectivity nor provide a perfect account of the believer's subjectivity as it necessarily approaches religious phenomena from a unique methodological starting point defined by the researcher's academic and personal horizon.

Although the situation is even more complicated in the case of Religious Education as opposed to Religious Studies because any such hermeneutical lens is usually chosen for students of RE without them realising it, Freathy et al. agree with Cope that students, especially when coming from non-religious backgrounds, tend to experience scepticism and doubt about religious phenomena and regard them as 'utterly preposterous, evidence of craziness or outside their personal comfort zones' and should therefore be encouraged to employ a hermeneutics of trust (Cope in R. Freathy & G. Freathy, 2013a, 158). However, this need for the definite choice of a side (either *emic*/empathetic or *etic*/critical), apparently felt by students of RE, becomes unnecessary if religious educators were to use a multi-disciplinary approach that allows both themselves and their students to step in and out of a variety of methodological roles and engage with religious beliefs and practices from a wide range of insider and outsider perspectives. As independent researchers, it is therefore argued, students taught in the light of the RE-searchers' approach, may 'keep a sense of their own identity' and develop their own interpretation of the relationship between student and object of study while also 'engaging in empathetic dialogic conversations with real or imagined representatives of as wide a range of hermeneutical frameworks as possible' (R. Freathy & G. Freathy, 2013a, 162).

As explained above, this multi-methodological approach to RE enables students to adopt a theology-centred viewpoint by stepping into the shoes of the cartoon character, See-The-Story Suzie, which teaches them, in turn, to employ the methods of Narrative Theology. It is therefore important to consider to what extent the criticisms raised against Reed and Freathy's narrative approach to theology in RE (discussed in section 3.4) apply also to the use of the narrative theological lens as part of the RE-searchers' approach. As we have seen, two main criticisms were raised against Narrative Theology as a 'stand-alone' methodology. First, although claiming to be applicable to religions other than Christianity, the approach has not been tested, e.g. through the methods of empirical research or extended theoretical argumentation, in relation to a number of different traditions, including non-Abrahamic ones, for example. The criticism that it is difficult to evaluate its potential for cross-religious applicability therefore remains one to be challenged, irrespective of whether Narrative Theology is promoted as an individual methodology or as one component within a broader, multi-methodological/interdisciplinary approach to RE. The second problem mentioned above – the choice of a single conceptualisation of religion in RE classrooms, one could argue however, is alleviated to some degree by the fact that Narrative Theology is not recommended here as the only or best lens to use in the study of religions, but as one option of a variety of methodological choices. This, for example, reduces the risk of indoctrination of (e.g. Christian) beliefs and values to the exclusion of other religious and non-religious worldviews and makes it less probable that a particular God-centred worldview is imposed upon the students. (That this is a crucial aspect to consider when trying to propose a theology-centred approach suitable for the context of multi-faith RE will be one of the arguments made in chapters 5 and 6 in relation to the alternative vision of theology developed in the present study.)

## 3.6 Summary: Interreligious Investigation as a Focal Point for Theology-Centred RE

To summarise: after providing a working definition of the terms ‘confessional’ and ‘non-confessional’ RE with a focus on methodological insider and outsider perspectives in the study of religions, this chapter examined three examples of existing theology-centred approaches to non-confessional RE, fulfilling the inclusion criteria of this research project (see chapter 2, section 2.4): Cooling’s concept-cracking strategy; Teece’s soteriological framework; and Reed and Freathy’s Narrative Theology. The main aim was to clarify the extent to which these approaches can be evaluated as adequate responses to the apparent compatibility problem (between theology and the values of non-confessional, multi-faith RE), explored in chapter 1, so as to be able to identify potential shortcomings/areas of improvement, useful to the development of an alternative view of theology in this context.

These are the conclusions drawn: both Cooling's and Reed and Freathy's approaches claim to be universally applicable to different religious traditions – a condition theology-centred RE should arguably fulfil in this multi-faith context – but neither empirical evidence nor detailed theorisation has been offered by the respective researchers to substantiate the validity of these assumptions. With regard to Cooling, I have argued, one potential hurdle to this enterprise could be the fact that the process of concept-cracking is strongly focused on the role revelation has played in Christian history, which may not be an adequate methodological lens for the study of non-Abrahamic religions. And even if it were possible to adapt this approach, in principle, to conceptualise all other (here: theistic) faiths, it could still be accused of being Christian-centred in its original purpose and methodological roots (the Stapleford Project) as it has not been designed, in the first place, for explorations of the theological dimensions of different theistic religions. As we have seen, this situation is slightly different in the case of Narrative Theology. Taking into account broad (philosophical) interpretations of ‘narrative’ in the hermeneutical process as all ‘narratives of life’ that communicate worldviews (religious and secular), the narrative approach to RE has a greater potential to be applied to traditions other than Christianity (including non-religious worldviews). Yet, there are other issues to consider such as whether or not methodological approaches to RE should work with a single conceptualisation of religions/worldviews and associated phenomena (as something that consists of narratives, in this case), or if they should rather be embedded in theoretical frameworks that balance and/or combine a number of different views of what religion(s) is/are and what it means to be religious for different people in different contexts. Finally, the only view of RE that fulfils the criterion of being explicitly interreligious – or *trans*-religious as one might specify in this instance – is Teece's soteriological framework for RE, based, conceptually, on Hick's pluralist interpretation of religion. This framework, I argued, has not only been deliberately designed for the study of the soteriological dimension of all the major post-axial religions, but its universal applicability has also been tested, in a number of detailed examples, in relation to these traditions (see Teece, 2012). As my analysis revealed, however, it is precisely this quest for universal applicability in the study of religions that can lead to serious problems, especially if it is done by identifying one (possibly small) aspect of religion (in the singular) as a common core of all religions (in the plural). From the perspective of Narrative Theology, one could criticise, for example, Teece's framework is very specific, focusing only on one 'plot line' – soteriology (i.e. narrative of salvation or salvation history), which makes it less inclusive than a broader narrative framework would be. Arguably, this might prevent students from discovering unique features and specificities in the narratives of individual religions – in short: the idea that each faith, faith community and affiliate might have their own story or stories to tell about their religious identity. These considerations are related to other problems in the soteriological framework which also limit its credibility as an appropriate approach to multi-faith RE, namely: the charges of cultural/religious relativism and essentialism in the study of religions. Here, the main challenge would be to ensure that the soteriological approach, promoted by Teece, finds a way to overcome its tendency to essentialise religious traditions (e.g. for the purpose of identifying a common core in all religions) by developing teaching strategies that clearly fulfil the need of balancing issues of particularity and universality in the context of Religious Studies.

It can therefore be concluded from this part of my ongoing literature review/analysis that what is still missing from RE research today is a sector-specific approach (compare section 1.3) to promoting theological understanding(s) in religiously unaffiliated schools that is truly **non-confessional** (not requiring faith commitment/not approaching the study of religions from within a particular faith tradition), **interreligious** (in the sense that it is not just open, or theoretically applicable, to the study of different religions, but also designed for this particular purpose) and – despite its potential for detecting theological similarities between religions – **comparative** in such a way that it never ignores the significance of particularity and difference within the study of religions.

# 4 Religious Understanding/Literacy in the Context of the Study of (Theistic) Religions

Having identified interreligious investigation as an important focus for the advancement of theology-centred, multi-faith RE (which is one of the theoretical foundations of my alternative, interreligious approach to theology, to be proposed in chapters 5 and 6), I will now progress to the more specific discussion of what I see as the primary aim of promoting any kind of theological focus in non-confessional RE: the development of students' theological *understanding(s)*, viewed here as a crucial aspect of religious literacy. As formulated in chapter 1, section 1.4, the precise question to examine here is in what ways gaining theological understanding(s) of theistic traditions contributes to becoming religiously literate (in relation to these religions) in RE. To be prepared to engage in this main discussion (chapter 5), however, we need to clarify first what exactly we mean by the terms: 'religious understanding' and 'religious literacy', both in general and in relation to the study of theistic faith traditions, specifically. Another reason why such terminological clarifications are required now is because 'understanding' and 'literacy', also in combination with both attributes, 'theological' and 'religious', are central elements in the foundational hypothesis of this thesis (section 1.5):

- There is no doubt that belief in God (ultimate reality) is the defining feature of theistic religions and hence, an important aspect to consider when studying them. Theology is concerned with a systematic study of concepts, teachings, beliefs and practices relating to God, the learning outcome of which could be called '*theological understanding*'. Developing such *theological understanding(s)* of the theistic religions studied in RE (by focusing on their respective key theological concepts, doctrines, etc.) therefore plays an important role in becoming *religiously literate* in relation to these traditions. (**Hypothesis 1**)

However, using these terms in such undifferentiated ways is problematic as it leaves key questions of this study unanswered. Concentrating on the broader terms 'religious understanding'/'literacy' alone, we should ask ourselves, for example: what does it mean to become a religiously literate person? What is the nature of religious understanding and how are the two related and/or differentiated? What do we mean by 'religious literacy'/'understanding' in the particular context of non-confessional RE – students' understanding of religion (singular), their understanding of religions (plural), a combination of both and/or their understanding(s) of *what it means to be religious for religious believers*? And is it even possible to develop any religious understanding without having religious beliefs oneself? As a next step in my argument for a non-confessional, God-centred approach aimed at furthering theological understanding(s) in multi-faith RE, the present chapter therefore examines the meanings of religious understanding (section 4.1) and religious literacy (section 4.2) with the intention of clarifying how they are interpreted and distinguished in this thesis. This will include broad definitions of the two notions – e.g. when religious understanding and literacy are viewed as general aims of RE – and more specific considerations of what they might mean in the context of theistic religions.

Based on the findings of this analysis (e.g. regarding the question of whether or not religious understanding requires first-hand, insider knowledge and/or experience of religious belief), the next chapter will then progress to similar investigations of the terms 'theological understanding'/'literacy' in RE (including the question of whether or not 'doing' theology requires faith commitment – although the latter term, too, must be carefully defined then). This will complete our preparation for the main discussion of chapters 5 and 6, which concentrates, among other things, on the place of theology in multi-faith RE; the role of theological understanding in becoming religiously literate; and the development of my own interreligious, theologically orientated approach and interpretive framework for furthering transcendence-/God-centred understanding(s) of different theistic faith traditions.

## 4.1 The Nature and Limits of Religious Understanding: Diving into the Philosophical Debate in (Religious) Education

The terms 'religious understanding'/'religious literacy' are often used synonymously in the context of RE (see, for instance, REC, 2013). It is important to realise, though, that they mean slightly different things and belong to different educational debates, the former of which could be described as broadly *philosophical* in nature and hence, in some respects, timeless, whereas the latter has strong *political* connotations to do with current debates about potential subject aims and purposes. I will start with the philosophical debate because 'understanding' could also be regarded as the hypernym to which the current variation of 'literacy' is linked, theoretically. Let us therefore take a step back and consider briefly what is meant by 'understanding' as such. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines understanding as possessing 'knowledge about a subject, situation, etc. or about how something works' (Cambridge Online Dictionary). Compared to an earlier version of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it is arguable, this definition lacks an important experiential aspect, namely that understanding is the apprehension of the character, nature and function of a thing resulting either from knowledge *or experience* of it or a combination of both (in Cox, 1983, 3). Moreover, what we mean by *religious* understanding, gained through knowledge and/or experience, depends on whether we interpret the word 'religious' as an adjective functioning as a noun, or as a term serving an adverbial purpose. Considering this linguistic ambiguity, Edwin Cox defines religious understanding either as 'understanding in the field of religion (i.e. understanding the beliefs, feelings, morals and life styles of religious people by getting to know and/or experiencing these things); or as a special type of understanding distinct from other types (Cox, 1983, 3).

This second definition is linked to a key question in the debate about religious understanding in Philosophy of Education – namely, whether the religious knowledge necessary to gain understanding in the area of religion is a unique epistemological type, e.g. attainable only by insiders of religion, in short, those who *believe* (whatever that might mean); or whether it is an ordinary type of knowledge that outsiders of religion may also develop. However, as my analysis of a particular argumentative strand in this philosophical debate will show (arguments for and against the logical possibility of non-confessional RE), my insertion – 'whatever the term "believe" might mean' – is crucial to this discussion for two main reasons. First, different religious people hold different beliefs which can certainly be described much more precisely than just as 'religious'. Specific types of belief (e.g.

beliefs in God versus beliefs about God's nature, to name two examples relevant to theology) can therefore be associated with particular types of understanding which may be too diverse for 'religious' to be a useful overall specification of them. And secondly, focusing on beliefs in the first place (when trying to define the nature of religious understanding) also reveals a particular, i.e. cognitive, understanding, not just of the term 'religious understanding', but also of religion as such – in short: the underlying conceptualisation of religion shaping the whole discussion. What I mean by this and why it is so crucial not to base (theology-centred) approaches to RE on such a simplistic (e.g. purely rationalistic) interpretation of religion and religious understanding, will become evident in my analysis of two contrary arguments of the nature of religious understanding: Hirst's (1974e) argument against the logical possibility of non-confessional RE (based on a view of religious understanding dependent on belief) and Hand's (2006) refutation of it. My aim is to show that, even though Hand's counter-argument is internally consistent and hence, theoretically valid, it is based on a very limited view of religion (as propositional belief only), which would make it a weak theoretical justification, e.g. for my choice of a focus on the *relationship* between theological and religious understanding (chapter 5), rather than the question of the *(im-)possibility* of theological understanding in non-confessional RE. As a better theoretical justification, I will therefore provide an alternative view of religious understanding as a matter of complex (personal/methodological) positionality, based on new insights on the apparent insider/outsider divide in RE, offered by Pett (2018b), Freathy and Davis (2019) and Walshe and Teece (2013). This will be the theoretical basis of my subsequent argument(s) for a view of theological understanding – and 'doing' theology – in non-confessional RE which, on a *methodological* level, does not presuppose (theistic) faith on the part of the students, but allows them to approach the study of theism from any *personal* (e.g. theistic, atheistic, agnostic) perspective they wish.

### 4.1.1 Religious Understanding as an Ordinary or Unique Epistemological Type

Apart from discussing issues of objectivity and rationality in the context of education (see section 1.2), Hirst dedicated a substantial proportion of his research to theorising about the epistemology of religious belief, in particular requirements for religious understanding and potential limits to the realisability of non-confessional RE. This philosophical debate, taking place most notably between himself, Marples (1978), Attfield (1978) and Gardner

(1980), was initiated by Hirst's assertion that teaching non-confessional RE is an educational endeavour that is logically impossible and hence, unreasonable to maintain (Hirst, 1974b). The basis for this was his forms-of-knowledge argument involving the following two premises. The first premise states that religion is a unique epistemological type. The second premise (expanding upon Wittgenstein's argument that understanding language involves not only 'agreement in definitions', but also and necessarily so, 'agreement in judgements'; see Wittgenstein, 1953, section 242) establishes that to understand a unique epistemological type, a person must hold certain propositions of that particular type of knowledge to be true. In the case of religion, Hirst therefore claimed, religious understanding cannot be gained without believing certain religious propositions to be true, in short: some form of religious belief (Hirst, 1974e, 88-89). Non-confessional Religious Education, attempting to promote religious knowledge without presupposing religious belief on the part of the students or furthering belief as part of the knowledge-forming process, would thus be simply impossible. It goes without saying that, if these assumptions were true, the similar project of promoting *theological* understanding, independent of (theistic) belief, would also be doomed to failure, because the whole concept of non-confessional RE is obviously called into question here.

Initial reactions to Hirst in the 1970s focused primarily on his second premise – that religious understanding presupposes belief. Marples, for example, agreed with Hirst on the grounds that religion is a unique 'form of life' that uses a 'distinctive religious language' with its own conceptual scheme (Marples, 1978, 85). Also drawing upon Wittgenstein, he reasoned that understanding the 'language game of religion', and religious concepts in particular, requires two important abilities: first, to 'exercise' the religious concept at hand (being able to identify connections between related religious terms and possessing the 'verbal skills' to employ them accurately); and second, to 'apply' the concept (e.g. by connecting religious terms with particular cases and knowing how they relate to experiences), which can only be learned by RE students if they also agree on 'what is to count as fact and fiction' in religious matters (Marples, 1978, 83-85). Again, with regard to theological concepts (e.g. concepts about God's nature and relationship with humankind), one could thus conclude that outsiders of theistic belief who cannot know how such concepts relate to personal (religious) experiences will not be able to develop 'true' understanding of these concepts. As we will see below, however, the term 'true' in such lines of argument is problematic. Who has the authority to decide what truth is in religious matters? Why should there be only one 'true' understanding, not many? And could one not state, more neutrally, that outsiders of theistic religions will simply develop a 'different' kind of, but not necessarily less valuable, understanding or understandings of religious concepts (including theological ones), in comparison with those who have first-hand experience of theistic belief?

A similar position was adopted by Attfield who refuted Marples's argument that understanding religious concepts necessarily involves knowing the links they have with direct experience (Attfield, 1978, 94). The problem with this objection, however, is that it assumes non-religious people, whilst not needing first-hand religious experiences themselves, should learn *what it is like* to have religious beliefs, which implies again that, for some obscure, unstated reason, religious outsiders must have similar, if not the same, understanding(s) of religious subject matter as insiders would do. Attfield used a thought experiment about the phenomenon of colour perception to illustrate this point. A non-human, yet personal, rational being such as an angel who happens to lack the sense perception of human colour vision and hence cannot associate any personal experiences with colour words as they are used by us humans (e.g. the spiritual being lacks the phenomenal consciousness or *quale* of the colour word 'red': i.e. knowing what it is like to see a red object) could nonetheless come to understand the concept of colour by using the skill of analogy (Attfield, 1978, 95).[45] Such a being, he argues, although unfamiliar with human sense perception, would possess its own intuition analogous to sensation, from which it could work out the 'conceptual scheme of colour', without ever having to 'hold any beliefs about the colour of objects' (Attfield, 1978, 95). In the same way, he therefore concludes, people who have no religious experiences themselves could work out from similar experiences what it is like for religious people to feel this way without having to share their beliefs as a prerequisite for understanding.

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[45] In the same year (1978), Holley argued a similar case for the possibility of academic religious understanding on the basis of non-religious, yet 'ego-transcending' experiences, which he saw as a universal human trait (Holley, 1978). He argued that pupils who do not believe in God or any other type of ultimate reality could develop their own unique way of looking at the world, quasi-theologically or -religiously so to speak, by focusing on non-religious moments of transcendence in their own lives and transferring these experiences to religious subject matter (Holley, 1978). Having established that any form of understanding has an 'ecstatic' quality, 'whereby discernment of relations constantly draws man out of himself and his present status to a […] novel environment', Holley argues:

> 'This truth [about religious understanding] is popularly expressed by asserting that one must have experience in order to understand – and the greater the experience the greater the possibility of understanding clearly. But of significance here is the fact that, simply because understanding is ecstatic vision, so the experience required need not be immediate but only *relevant*' (Holley, 1978, 129-130, my insertion and emphasis).

Holley therefore concluded that such non-religious, but 'ego-transcending' moments, sufficiently relevant to religious experience to provide pupils with an idea of what it is like to believe in God, for instance, could be found in the awe people may feel when standing on the top of a majestic mountain or in the joy a beautiful painting or piece of music may bring.

One could use Jackson's classical argument in the philosophy of the mind (1982) as an objection to Attfield's view of phenomenal experience. Jackson used a similar thought experiment but arrived at a different conclusion: Scientist Mary is born, grows up and lives her whole life in a room where the only colours are black and white. She specialises in the neurophysiology of vision and acquires all the information there is about the colour red. Yet, when she leaves her monochrome world for the first time, she suddenly realises that her knowledge of red was incomplete because none of the physical facts about vision had taught her the *quale* (or feel) of the colour. This is meant to show that there is more to truly knowing something than simply gathering information or factual knowledge about it, namely the phenomenal character of our experiences that constitute part of the knowing (compare Jackson, 1982). This poses a threat to Attfield's position because whether or not it is possible for a person to derive his or her understanding of the *qualia* of particular human experiences *solely by analogy*, that is from other phenomenal experiences (as his argument seems to imply) is, at least, questionable. This reveals that arguments from analogous phenomenal experiences lead to dead ends in the discussion of the nature and limits of religious understanding. So, rethinking is needed to find an answer to the question how outsiders of (e.g. theistic) faith can develop understanding of religious (e.g. theological) subject matter.

One such different approach has been offered by Hand in 2006. Rather than rejecting Hirst's second premise (that understanding a form of knowledge necessarily involves holding certain propositions of that form to be true), Hand attacks the first premise, thereby questioning the underlying assumption that religion is a logically unique epistemological type. As indicated above, however, the problem with this more recent counter-argument to Hirst is that – although it may well be evaluated as valid in its philosophical construction – it involves a problem affecting the whole discussion about religious understanding, which can be easily overlooked, namely that overly simplistic, rationalistic conceptualisations of religion as propositional belief are hardly recommendable ones to adopt in RE. For this reason, Hand's argument cannot serve as an effective theoretical justification of non-confessional (including non-confessional, *theology-centred*) RE. To reveal this limitation, I will now present Hand's position and discuss possible objections (section 4.1.2) which have influenced my alternative interpretation of religious understanding developed in section 4.1.3.

### 4.1.2 Questioning Underlying Conceptualisations of Religion in the Debate About Insider/Outsider Understandings in RE

After careful philosophical argumentation[46], Hand arrives at the following conclusion: it is *not* correct to say that religious propositions constitute an autonomous epistemological class since it is possible to distribute these propositions 'without remainder over the familiar epistemological classes of mental and material propositions' known to all (non-religious and religious) people (Hand, 2006, 152). This argument is based on particular definitions of both the concept of religion and religious propositions. According to Hand, one can speak of people as having a religion when (i) they hold beliefs about a god or gods (defined here as transcendent or a superhuman personal being), and (ii) see this god or these gods as having some positive relevance to their lives (Hand, 2006, 98). Religious propositions can then simply be defined as 'propositions about divine persons', which are verifiable in the same way as propositions about human persons. This is because from Hand's point of view, divine personal beings – like human persons – also comprise minds and bodies (or at least some relation to the material world that can be compared to possessing a body) and have the same powers and capacities as humans do, albeit to a greater degree (Hand, 2006, 107, 152). Consequently, students of RE can come to understand what religious propositions mean by referring to the familiar epistemological classes of contingent propositions with private (mental) referents, and contingent propositions with public (material) referents, in short: 'without reference to distinctively religious experiences' (Hand, 2006, 152). The realisation of the aim of non-confessional RE (imparting religious understanding without also presupposing or imparting religious belief) is hence logically possible.

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[46] Four argumentative steps lead up to Hand's conclusion about the logical possibility of non-confessional RE. First, having considered the different lists of forms of knowledge Hirst provided over the course of the debate as well as common criticisms of this way of thinking (see, for example, Richard Pring, 1976), Hand provides the following restatement of Hirst's forms of knowledge thesis: 'The forms of knowledge are the categories of a logical taxonomy of propositions, which [*sic.*] categories are exhaustive and mutually exclusive. Propositions are categorized by the kind of *truth-test* or *method of verification* by which their truth or falsity is determined' (Hand, 2006, 46-47, emphasis in the text).

Second, to specify this, he distinguishes between 'necessary' and 'contingent' propositions: the former being 'true by virtue of [their] meaning' and hence, 'verified by analysing the meanings of [their] constituent expressions'; whereas the latter are 'true or false by virtue of experience' and must be verified/falsified 'by being checked against the facts' (Hand, 2006, 47). In other words, while necessary propositions can be true without correctly referring to anything (e.g. 'All unicorns have a single horn') because 'their truth is not dependent on the facts'; a contingent proposition is only true when both the 'referring part refers correctly' and the 'describing part describes correctly' (Hand, 2006, 47).

Assuming that religious propositions would fall under this second category, Hand further subdivides – as a third step – contingent propositions into 'propositions about private referents' (minds and mental states), which are 'verifiable by only one subject and without recourse to observation', and 'propositions about public referents' (clouds and rainstorms, or human bodies and patterns of behaviour, for instance), which are 'verifiable by a community of conscious subjects by means of observation' (Hand, 2006, 48). Hand calls them 'mental' and 'material' propositions, for short, and also points to the possibility of propositions that combine mental and material referents.

As a fourth step, he argues, if it were correct to say that religious propositions constitute an autonomous epistemological class (Hirst's first premise), their definition could not fall under any of the three categories of the taxonomy already considered, that is they cannot be (i) necessary, (ii) mental or (iii) material propositions (see above). He then suggests as a working hypothesis (to refute it) that religious propositions, to be classified as a new epistemological type, 'would have to refer to and describe *non-material public referents, observed or apprehended by non-sensory means*' (Hand, 2006, 55, my emphasis).

One possible criticism of Hand relates to questions of particularity in the study of religions. Defining religion in terms of belief in God and God as a personal divine being makes it difficult, for example, to categorise non-theistic (Theravada) Buddhism or Advaita Hinduism as religious traditions, which raises uncomfortable questions in multi-faith RE. Do some of the traditions studied in RE fulfil the criterion of what constitutes a religion more than others? Are they more worthy to be studied than 'less religious' traditions as a result? Who has the authority to make such decisions, or define what religions are, in the first place? And how will students discover the myriad ways in which religions, even those which hold beliefs in the divine, differ in belief and practice? Similarly, Barnes (2008) contends that Hand's view of religion pays insufficient attention to differences in belief that exist between and within religions, which arguably is an important element in understanding the phenomenon of religion and religious diversity in particular. Regarding theistic beliefs, Barnes claims:

> 'religions are distinctive in terms of particular beliefs about God. For example, Christians believe that the divine is personal and Trinitarian in form, Jews and Muslims deny this, although they argue that God is personal, thus creating a contrast with Advaita Hinduism and Theravada Buddhism (the former believes that the divine is an impersonal principle, whereas the latter denies the existence of a substantial reality, divine or otherwise).' (Barnes, 2008, 68)

Yet, what is even more crucial to understanding religion(s), Barnes argues, is being aware of the significance of deep religious disagreements on issues of doctrinal truth. Understanding religious diversity is not just a matter of knowing that beliefs and practices differ between and within religions, but also a matter of grasping the impact such differences can have on the commitment of religious adherents when they are convinced 'that their particular version of religion faithfully represents and pictures the true nature of reality' (Barnes, 2008, 68). Barnes therefore insists, deep learning in RE cannot take place without a thorough consideration of 'both the doctrinal and the truth asserting nature' of each religious tradition studied (Barnes, 2008, 68-69). Defining religion(s), predominantly, in terms of propositional beliefs, without exploring the relationship such beliefs may have to issues of truth, Barnes criticises, could thus lead to a misrepresentation of religions in the classroom. I therefore conclude, in accordance with Barnes, that one should be aware of the limitations of Hand's defence of non-confessional RE, when evaluating it – in particular, his narrow definition of religious belief. Although supporting the subject's existence on the grounds that furthering religious understanding in non-confessional settings is certainly possible at a theoretical level, Hand's argument is too restricted in its philosophical focus to illuminate questions about the 'appropriateness' of the types of religious understanding potentially gained in RE, or the ultimate 'success' of this whole pedagogical endeavour (Barnes, 2008). The discussion must therefore move on, from the question of whether religious understanding is possible in non-confessional RE, to *what kinds of (possible) understandings should be promoted* in the classroom.

In other words, Hand's conceptualisation of religion as propositional belief is too simplistic to be used as an argumentative basis for determining the nature of religious knowledge and the possibility of religious understanding in RE. Even if we accept his two conditions that people who have a religion must always hold beliefs about divine persons (which is problematic as it excludes certain religious traditions from the possibility of being understood) and that these divine persons must have a positive relevance to their lives, it is important to note that what constitutes *having a religious belief about God* is not quite the same as what constitutes *living a religious life as an expression of personal faith in that God*. If this is the case, all that Hand's argument has established would be that it is possible for students of non-confessional RE to come to understand – to a certain extent and in a particular way – what it means for people to have certain propositional religious beliefs (about a god or gods). It is difficult to see, however, how using such a view of religion in RE teaching would also ensure that they learn anything about the meaning of religion in the singular, interpreted as a generalised phenomenon or category of human existence, as well as religions in the plural, interpreted as individual, yet interrelated and highly complex phenomena that exist in the world and manifest themselves as ways of living in the subjective experience of religious believers.

These considerations relate to a criticism of current RE research and practice, proposed by Patricia Hannam (2019). The whole discourse about RE's role in the public realm, including popular arguments for a need for increased religious literacy – Hannam argues – is based on a questionable conception of what religion is in Religious Education that underestimates the significance of furthering students' understanding of the 'existential' dimension of religion (Hannam, 2019, 7). According to Hannam, three structurally different answers to the question as to what it means to be religious can be offered for the context of RE: first, a conception that sees being religious 'as a matter of having beliefs and asserting that these beliefs are true'; second, a conception that sees being religious 'as a matter of practice' or 'conducting one's life according to certain rules and traditions'; and third, a conception that sees being religious in terms of human existence, that is, 'as a particular way of being aware of and leading one's life' (Hannam, 2019, 7). It is this third conception, she claims, that has not been given enough attention in RE circles to this day. One of the reasons she offers for this development is the legacy of Smart's phenomenology stressing objective knowledge, which has shaped the field of RS both at higher-education and school level since the 1960s:

> 'Smart's orientation moved from the subject to the object of religion and because of this, although initially looking positive as an approach to Religious Education, something important was lost. This approach, because of its focus on the phenomena as object, became less able to be open to the one experiencing the phenomena; that is the subject.' (Hannam, 2016, 34)

For RE to take into account the subjective, experiential realm of religious belief, it should therefore conceptualise religion existentially, by placing the idea of personal faith at the heart of the study of religions. Here, faith is understood in terms of a particular interpretation of the Greek word '*pistes*' as 'trust' (as opposed to 'belief') – the believer's 'willingness to be open to another kind of awareness or manner of attending' (Hannam, 2016, 103, 151). Drawing on Simone Weil's explorations of the existential dimension of religion (see, for example, Weil, 1965), Hannam thus proposes for the context of RE an understanding of what it means to be religious, not as something for which there is an object, but mainly and essentially as a relationship between subjectivity and faith, manifesting itself in the lives of believers as a particular mode of existing in this world (Hannam, 2016, 151).[47]

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[47] See also Hannam & Biesta's recent critcicism of CoRE 2018, to be considered in section 4.2.1.

Yet, while this view of religion as a mode of existence is certainly an important aspect to consider in the debate about students' religious understanding(s), there are several inconsistencies in these statements that need attention. For instance, Hannam's argument moves from talking about religion (and what religion is) to talking about Religious Studies (and what RS does) as if the two were the same and not one (RS) being the study of the other (religion/religions). The logical connection she intends to establish here, I assume, is that certain methodological preferences in the history of RS (phenomenology), due to their underlying assumptions about the nature of religion (phenomenological/explorable from an objective outsider's perspective), have led to a neglect of existential concerns (of insiders of religion) in the study of religions. Even if this were true, however, it is probably not fair to ascribe this 'loss' in RE (e.g. concern with the subject of religion, not object of RS) to Smart's phenomenology. As indicated in chapter 1, Smart's approach not only included the study of what he called the 'experiential' dimension of religion, it also put 'empathy' with the religious subject, i.e. believer/practitioner, at the heart of any phenomenological investigation. The developments Hannam describes might therefore be more the result of misinterpretations or partial applications of Smart's phenomenology in the classroom.

Another critical response to Hannam (as already argued in connection with Narrative Theology in chapter 3 or Hand's argument in this chapter) is that no conception of religion on its own (i.e. when used as the only lens through which to approach the task of understanding religion and religions) will be capable of revealing to students the great complexity of the phenomenon of religion, let alone the great external and internal diversity of individual religious traditions. Choosing human existence as an interpretive framework for studying religious beliefs and practices in RE, I would therefore argue, is appropriate only if this is done temporarily and for a particular educational purpose such as connecting students with the experiential realm of religious belief – not exclusively – but in addition to other (e.g. doctrinal, narrative, ritual, social, institutional and material) aspects of religion(s). Ideally, such an existentially focused, interpretive framework should therefore also be designed in a way that enables students to discover the interrelatedness of different conceptions of what it means to be religious, including the complex roles that propositional beliefs, doctrinal truths and practices play in the life of the believer. As the following chapters will show, my own argument for an interreligious approach to theology, although being based on a similarly existential idea of *the centrality of people's relationship with God or the divine* in theistic belief, prioritises this existential viewpoint only in relation to the task of conceptualising theistic belief for the specific purpose of studying theological content of theistic religions in religiously unaffiliated schools. It does not, however, assume that other conceptions of what being religious might mean are less relevant to the development of students' understanding(s) of these religions. How it is possible to achieve such a balance of different conceptualisations of being religious, *precisely within a broader existential framework focusing on the relationship between humans and the divine*, I will attempt to show in chapter 6.

For now, it is important to note, though, that stressing the significance of students' understandings of the existential dimension of religious belief, theistic or otherwise, unfortunately complicates the task of refuting the (Hirstian) argument that religious understanding is a unique epistemological type, achievable only by insiders of religious belief. As we have seen, the success of Hand's refutation of this argument depends entirely on whether or not we accept his limited conception of religion as propositional belief. If we evaluate this view as too narrow, e.g. by pointing to other important aspects or religion/being religious ignored by Hand (as I have just done), we must conclude that his argument, despite its internal logical consistency, does not provide a satisfying positive answer to the question as to whether religious understanding is possible, independent of belief. Without such an answer, however, it will be difficult to argue for a theology-centred approach to RE, aimed at furthering students' theological understanding(s) of theistic traditions, that is adequate for non-confessional educational settings in the sense that it does not require students to hold or accept theistic beliefs.

Furthermore, arguing for any inclusive view of religious/theological understanding at all – accessible to insiders and outsiders of religion – makes it necessary to explain, as clearly as possible, what we mean by religious/theological understanding and how they relate to the conceptualisation(s) of religion (theistic and non-theistic) we thus wish to promote in RE. Hannam's existential conceptualisation might be a useful starting point for such an endeavour. Yet, choosing it as a single lens through which to view religions and religious believers is not ideal as it might limit students' insights into the complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon of religion. And there are other complications: if we accepted Hannam's idea of what it means to be religious for religious believers as 'being open to another kind of awareness', to placing one's trust in the Other, and hence, having a 'particular mode of existence' in this world, we might ask (again): to what extent is this way of existing unique and thereby, understandable only by those who come from a faith perspective themselves? And more problematically, would this not also imply that non-religious people are closed to this 'other kind of awareness', rather than allowing for the possibility that there might not be such an 'other awareness' after all? This could potentially lead to a pedagogy of RE that is implicitly based on a faith perspective which, even if it may not be faith-specific, would not be adequate for RE in schools without a religious affiliation. Or similarly, if theistic belief, in particular, is conceived as an expression of the relationship between humans and the divine (as my study suggests in chapter 6), might not this relationship be so different from any other type of relationship that those who do not have a theistic faith may never 'fully' understand this aspect of human existence?

In both cases, however, a possible way out of this circular argument can be found in a view of understanding, in general, that is less radical or absolutist, for that matter, in which case 'full' understanding in the context of religion would not be a desirable objective. Thus, it is arguable that talking about understanding, categorically, e.g. as in 'one either has it or not', ignores the possibility that there may not only be different types of religious understanding students may gain, but also that these understandings, most likely, all come in degrees. To examine these possibilities further, the next section will therefore (re-)consider the insider/outsider issue in non-confessional RE, by bringing in new perspectives proposed by Pett (2018b), Freathy and Davis (2019) and Walshe and Teece (2013).

### 4.1.3 New Thoughts on the Insider/Outsider Issue: Religious Understanding as a Matter of Complex Positionality

One recent contribution that offers new insights into the insider/outsider problem in RE, has been made by Stephen Pett (2018). Rather than providing theories of the potential nature and limits of students' religious understanding based on particular conceptions of religion (as Hirst, Hand and Barnes have done), Pett shifts the focus to the connection between that which is studied in RE (i.e. religions and religious beliefs and practices) and those who study it, asking how insider/outsider positionalities of both students and objects of study relate to this. These considerations – in combination with other ideas about the necessary plurality of perspectives in RE teaching and learning (e.g. Freathy & Davis, 2019) – will help us to refute the argument that religious understanding is a unique epistemological type requiring faith commitment – a conclusion which is necessary for my development of a non-confessional approach to furthering theological understanding(s) in chapter 5.

A common assumption about contemporary RE practice, Pett claims, is that the subject of multi-faith RE, whilst looking at 'what it means to be an insider of a religion or belief' is best advised to do so 'from the position of the outsider', that is as someone of a different faith, or one with a non-religious worldview (Pett, 2018b, 50; compare Cooling 2010). According to him, this constitutes a sharp contrast with initial disciplinary attitudes within RS, found for example in phenomenological approaches to the study of non-Christian religions in the mid-twentieth century, according to which *emic* approaches (e.g. to the exploration of Hinduism), starting with the insider perspective being studied, were seen as more valuable (see Jamison, 2006, 3-7) than *etic* ones, starting with outsider views and applying external frameworks to the traditions studied (Pett, 2018b, 50). Arguably, this is a very different depiction of what phenomenology originally tried to achieve from the object-focused description offered by Hannam (section 4.1.2). Rather than overemphasising objectivity, Pett claims, early phenomenologists thought *etic* discourses of 'Hinduism' which had been common in colonial times (a term which itself can be viewed as a Christian, outsider's invention, imposed upon Asian culture, one might add), were highly problematic. For example, outsider viewpoints in Comparative Religion such as conservative, evangelical Christian descriptions of Hindus as 'heathens' in need of salvation through Christ, sought to explain the findings of their cultural explorations in terms of external categories derived from their own background, Western Protestant Christianity, and thus could not do justice to the self-understanding of the Hindu traditions encountered (Jamison, 2006, 6-7).[48] Disciplinary attitudes within RS at the time therefore stressed the value of insider perspectives and their potential to reveal to the researcher aspects of the self-identities of religious traditions.

In RE today, Pett claims, however, there has recently been a mood shift away from this view of outsider approaches as 'bad' and insider approaches as 'good' to the reverse juxtaposition of supposedly 'objective' and, hence, recommendable outsider positions in the study of religion(s) with inappropriate insider positions, suspected of 'draw[ing] students in to become insiders themselves' (Pett, 2018b, 50). Evidence for this change in attitude, he argues, can be found in a number of recent RE reports that were published in 2015[49]:

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[48] This also impacted on the ways in which Asian traditions were studied under colonial British rule – methods, in other words. The study of Hindu traditions, given that it was strongly influenced by Christian theology, was primarily concerned with the exegesis of sacred scriptures (Cort, 1996, 614) and hence, drew on a text-centred approach to understanding Hindu traditions that ignored, for example, the significance of material culture (such as Hindu iconography and devotional items) as a manifestation of the lived experience of religious adherents, revealed in the practice of image-worship, for instance (Knott, 2000, 69). By contrast, *emic* discourses around Hinduism in the mid-twentieth century, were often seen by phenomenologists of religion, rather positively, as emphasising the great complexity of Hindu beliefs and practices, including internal varieties ranging from the monism of Advaita Vedanta and the *bhakti* cults of Vaishnavism to polytheistic Vedic religion(s) (Jamison, 2006, 7).

> 'This suspicion means that in RE we should instead focus on outsider perspectives, often with an implication that these outsider views are naturally neutral and objective. Outsider views are seen as the appropriate model for RE in a secular society: open, exploratory, not imposing a view. (Pett, 2018b, 50)

Although this shift to 'objective RE' is certainly a valuable observation, it might help to add more differentiation to Pett's argument. What is not clarified, fully, here is that we are dealing with two distinct, but interrelated questions: first: who is doing the studying (insiders or outsiders of religious belief)? And second: how should this study be carried out (from the inside or outside of religious belief)? The first question looks at the student's own positionality in relation to that which is being studied – religion(s). As John and Freathy (2019, 52) argue, it reminds us that RE students should be encouraged to think both 'reflexively and reflectively about their own position' in relation to what they explore in RE, in short: various objects of study. The second question is concerned with methods and thus makes us think about the ways in which, and from which methodological perspectives, those objects of study can or should be investigated. Viewed in this way, the link between supposedly inappropriate *methodological* insider positions and students' *personal* insider positions is not a necessary one to draw. It could be claimed, for example, that it is possible for an 'outsider' of theistic belief to attempt to study theistic religion(s) from the 'inside', e.g. through phenomenological methods that ask them to suspend their (dis-)belief, *bracket* their worldview and engage, empathetically, with the perspectives of believers in the divine. Yet, that is very different from teaching RE on the assumption that pupils are insiders of religious and/or theistic belief or, if not, should become such.

Despite this lack of specification, however, important conclusions can be drawn from Pett's insights. Based on his observations, it is arguable, for instance, that both types of binary opposition (portraying insider viewpoints as good/outsider viewpoints as bad or vice versa) ignores the complexity of the whole insider/outsider issue in RE, thus deepening the divide between two, perhaps only seemingly, distinct positions. Intending to show that the boundaries between insider and outsider positions in the context of religion are blurred, Pett lists a number of useful examples, some of which are presented below to support the claim that we are all, in fact, both outsiders and insiders when it comes to positioning ourselves to religious matters:

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[49] The reports Pett refers to are: *A New Settlement* (Clarke and Woodhead 2015), *RE for REal* (Dinham and Shaw 2015) and *Living with Difference* (CORAB, 2015) which lean towards exploring religion from outsider perspectives, using data, sociological theory and methods from RS (see Pett, 2018b, 50).

> 'You might be a Roman Catholic and so an Anglican outsider, but with much in common with Anglican Catholics, or a charismatic Roman Catholic insider, with much in common with Pentecostals (…) Or you may be an atheist insider and so an outsider as far as Christianity is concerned; but research shows there are atheists who believe in life after death and angels, just as there are atheists who are simply not bothered about religion, as it has no relevance to their lives; and there are atheists who are not secular materialists but who "touch wood" and read their horoscopes with more than passing interest, or who are "spiritual but not religious" (see, for example, Pett 2018a)' (Pett, 2018b, 50-51)

This shows that there is much more fluidity to be found within insider and outsider perspectives on religious matters than common binary juxtapositions of these terms imply.

As Pett mentions, too, this relates to another recent proposition for a non-binary view of insider/outsider positions in RE: Walshe and Teece's (2013) argument for a single 'spectrum' of religious understanding, shared by both insiders and outsiders of religious belief. As my analysis will show, however, the idea of a spectrum – whilst helping us to think of religious understanding in non-oppositional terms – rests on a questionable premise and must therefore be modified to work as a concept. To do so, I will first present the argument: Walshe and Teece claim that past debates about the various individual conceptions of religious understanding discussed in the RE context – summarised by them as the three views of religious understanding as 'believing' (Hirst, Marples, Gardner), 'theological understanding' (Hession and Kieran) and an academic or 'scholarly understanding of religion' (Holley, Cox) – has created 'an unhelpful polarisation' that treats the question of understanding as 'an all or nothing affair'.[50] The two poles exercising power in this debate can be identified as those who believe religion can only be understood from an *emic* (insider's) perspective; and those who are convinced it is also possible to come to an *etic* (outsider's) understanding of religion. The problem with such binary thinking is that it can become a source of unnecessary opposition, here between insiders and outsiders of religious belief. Those who see believing as a requirement for religious understanding may feel the urge to deny outsiders of religion the capacity for true understanding, which raises questions about whether non-confessional RE is at all logically possible and hence, a viable educational activity (Walshe & Teece, 2013, 5). The attribute 'true' in 'true understanding' is important here because opposition can also occur between those who see the religious understanding potentially gained by outsiders as appropriate in the sense that it does justice to the believers' self-understanding; and those who think any understanding outsiders might develop will only be a 'cognitive, intellectual understanding of the phenomenon studied' that, at worst, can be 'rational' and 'cold' (Walshe & Teece, 2013, 5).

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[50] See Cox, 1983; Gardner, 1980; Hession & Kieran, 2007; Hirst, 1972, 1974d, 1974e, 1981; Holley, 1978; Marples, 1978.

To counter the trend towards such binary oppositions, Walshe and Teece suggest, following Grimmitt (1987) and Astley and Francis (1996), it is more helpful to think of insiders' and outsiders' views of religion as different, but interconnected points on the same 'spectrum' or 'continuum'. They explain:

> 'There is no clear cut-off between them [being conscious of religion and having religious consciousness (Astley & Francis, 1996)] 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.' (Walshe & Teece, 2013, 5, my insertion and emphasis)

Hence, they conclude, it is better to conceive of religious understanding, in the context of RE, as a 'spectrum of understanding', in which both the participant's and the observer's understanding of religion are equally valued. This also has the advantage that the aim of imparting religious understanding becomes acceptable for religiously unaffiliated schools. The fact that students often come from a variety of religious and non-religious backgrounds, approaching the study of religion(s) from insider and outsider perspectives (or a combination of both) no longer poses a problem because all these positions are valuable as aspects of the spectrum of understanding possible in RE and can thus be regarded as 'evidence of a student's *religious understanding*' (Walshe & Teece, 2013, 5-6, emphasis in the text).

As indicated above, however, this presentation of religious understanding as one spectrum is misleading as the two main types of understanding that it puts on opposite ends – being religiously conscious as an insider of religion/being conscious of religion as an outsider – are categorically different and hence, not to be located on one spectrum/continuum at all. The first one refers to a type of understanding, regardless of that which is understood; the second one refers to that which is understood, regardless of the type of understanding. These are categorically different things. Confusion only emerges when one blends (i) a type of understanding which can be more or less religious (which, arguably, can be a matter of degree, as Walshe and Teece also specify in their example) with (ii) an object of study which can be more or less religious (e.g. sacred texts, compared to flowers left at a war memorial, identifiable perhaps as an example of civil religion). Despite these possibilities of degree *within* both types of understanding, the two categories themselves are still located on two different axes or, in fact, continuums – given the gradual internal variations in each category. The problem with Walshe and Teece's idea of a single spectrum is therefore that it focuses on one point at which there is an intersection between these two axes/continuums, namely a single religious object of study understood in more or less religious ways (insider/outsider), without realising that the two definitions of religious understanding they use, whilst possibly intersecting at various points (as their example shows) are nevertheless fundamentally different. This would not be the case if the spectrum they propose was simply about the extent to which one is an insider/outsider of religion, but even then, such a view of religious understanding would not be very satisfying because insider/outsider perspectives are not the only determinant of one's religious understanding or understanding of religion(s).

Another problem with Walshe and Teece's view is that it does not distinguish, precisely enough, between that type (or those types) of understanding students might develop in RE, and the type(s) of understanding teachers want to instil in their students through RE. While it may be true that insider/outsider types of religious understanding have equal value in RE when they occur, or are further developed, in students as a result of the education they receive, we might use a different value system for the assessment of teachers' intentions. Thus, it is possible to claim that different methodological approaches can sometimes mirror different pedagogical motivations, of which some may be closer to one type/continuum of religious understanding (in this case, a teacher's *emic* view of religion), than the other type/continuum (a teacher's *etic* view of religion). For example, RE teachers who come from a Christian faith background and wish to promote a type of religious understanding that is as close as possible to their own religious perspective might choose a (e.g. experiential) Christian theological approach as their main methodology; whereas atheist teachers, having themselves studied the phenomenon of religion from the outside and wanting to share with their students the tools and strategies needed for that, might make methodological choices that resonate more with an outsider's view of religion such as the phenomenology of religion. This raises the question to what extent the types of understandings developed by students in RE are influenced by the methodological choices that teachers make and perhaps, *their* tendency towards insider or outsider views of religion. Whether or not the practice of RE is an adequate activity in religiously unaffiliated schools – *and whether or not theology is an adequate methodological choice in this context* – both depend not only on the possibility or impossibility of religious/theological understanding on the part of the students or the form such understanding(s) may take (e.g. faith-requiring or not), but also on the motivation that may lead teachers to the use of a given pedagogical approach.

To provide a more nuanced view of religious understanding for the context of non-confessional RE, it is therefore recommendable not to try to dissolve the binary opposition of insider/outsider views at one (all-encompassing) 'blow', so to speak, but rather in a number of individual steps, each concentrating on a different aspect of the debate – students' personal positionalities in relation to religion; methodological (e.g. *emic/etic*) perspectives; degrees of 'religiousness' in different objects of study, etc. As a first step, one could thus limit one's focus on the variety of the possibly changing positions students may adopt vis-à-vis religious belief and therefore describe religious understanding in the context of RE as a matter of *complex personal positionality*. For this, it is useful to turn again to Pett's recent insights. He gives the following four points to explain why it makes little sense to maintain the insider/outsider dualism in matters of religion and RE. First, we need to acknowledge that 'we all stand somewhere', that we all come from our personal backgrounds and adopt certain positions, which affects our capacity to encounter other people and their perspectives in a neutral and objective manner (Pett, 2018b, 52). Second, we can therefore never assume our own neutrality or objectivity: it is often assumed that those who have a religious faith, such as Christian students or teachers in the RE classroom, are not neutral with regard to religion(s), but the same applies to students and teachers who have a secular, atheist or agnostic position (compare Revell & Walters, 2010). In short, we always 'stand somewhere, not nowhere' (Pett, 2018b, 52). As Jackson and Everington suggest, it may therefore be better to call for 'impartiality', rather than objectivity/neutrality in the context of RE – a term which they define as 'organising teaching and learning *without discrimination* as to ethnicity, religion, class, or political opinions, with freedom of expression allowed within agreed limits' (Jackson & Everington, 2017, 10, my emphasis). The third and fourth points Pett offers focus on furthering students' awareness of their own and others' perspectives and the ways these perspectives shape their encounters with religious and non-religious people, both inside and outside the school context. Pett therefore draws the conclusion that we should be:

> 'helping [pupils] to realise that they look at the world through lenses of their experience too: they stand somewhere in relation to the material they are studying. We want them to be aware of where they stand in relation to being complex insiders/outsiders, to be aware that they have a position and that it affects how they encounter and respond to the content of RE' (Pett, 2018b, 54)

As a second step, one could then focus more on methodological considerations. I will use questions of the relationship of Religious Studies and Theology as an example. For this, it is important to realise that the above insights relate in important ways to the question of the potential role and status of theology in RE. Focusing on the issue of insider/outsider positionalities within this disciplinary relationship, Freathy and Davis argue, for example, that the concept of the 'neutral' perspective in RE (often associated with RS approaches, as opposed to the so called 'confessional', insider's approaches of Theology) is in fact an 'oxymoron' (Freathy & Davis, 2019, 459). The reality we find in RE – and should therefore acknowledge instead – is a necessary plurality of perspectives: even theistic worldviews and particular theologies, they claim, include a variety of perspectives, of which some are in harmony and others in conflict with one another, and these perspectives are '(inter-) subjective, reflecting the personal/social stories and experiences that individuals/communities bring to their encounter with the subject matter' (Freathy & Davis, 2019, 459). Given these considerations, it is important to cease portraying the disciplinary relationship of Religious Studies and Theology in terms of binary oppositions such as those based on the distinction of supposedly adequate outsider (neutral, objective, etc.) and inadequate insider (confessional, subjective, etc.) perspectives to be adopted in RE teaching. This makes it possible to see Theology in the context of RE in a new light, namely as a discipline that, *by its very nature*, enables students to engage with the question of positionality and subjectivity in the study of religion(s). Drawing on Gavin Hyman (2004, 215-217), Freathy and Davis explain, Theology, and also theologically-informed Religious Studies, potentially 'give rise to a more vibrant and vigorous religious engagement than was allowed by the insipid and ostensibly neutral tradition of liberal modernity, underpinning "pure" Religious Studies' (Freathy & Davis, 2019, 460). The reason for this is that Theology is more aware of its own positionality – or *positionalities*, as one might add, given the great methodological diversity found in the field – and may hence recognise the positionality/-ies of others more easily, than has traditionally been the case with RS. They conclude:

> 'A value of theologies and theological inquiries within multi-faith RE in schools *without* a religious affiliation might be (…) that they provide a means by which students are exposed to the beliefs of others, *articulated as such*, and given an opportunity to reflect upon their own positionality in relation to these beliefs. This is profoundly different from a conceptualisation of theology and theological inquiry, and of their application within RE, which requires or promotes (…) personal commitment by participants to a specific theistic faith tradition (or indeed to any particular worldview or perspective).' (Freathy & Davis, 2019, 460, emphases in the text).

How these reflections (upon an understanding of Theology that is aware of its own positionality and others' perspectives but does not require faith commitment on the part of the student) relate to the questions of the place of theology in non-confessional, multi-faith RE today as well as the potential relationship between theological understanding and religious literacy, will be examined more closely in chapter 5.

However, what we may draw from the insights provided by Pett (2018b) and Freathy and Davis (2019) for now is that religious understanding, in the context of multi-faith RE in religiously unaffiliated schools, is best described as a *matter of complex (personal and methodological) positionality* vis-à-vis religion(s). Due to the necessary plurality of perspectives found in RE, both in the subjects who study religion(s) and the methods through which objects of study are explored, it is arguable that RE always enables different types and degrees of understandings of its curriculum contents and that it does so in a variety of ways for different students at different points in the learning process, depending on the particular lenses through which the given content is approached and the subjective viewpoints from which students employ these lenses. Evidently, these considerations lead us to a very different conceptualisation of understanding than those developed by Hirst and Hand. Their philosophical arguments operate with a single conception of understanding (based, in turn, on a particular view of religious knowledge defined in terms of propositional beliefs) as well as narrow criteria for determining whether a person may gain such understanding or not (with or without accepting these propositions to be true). In contrast to this, I advocate a much broader, 'biaxial' view of religious understanding, which takes into account the complex triangular relationship – and related positionalities – of student, method and object of study, thereby allowing both insider and outsider types of understanding (at various degrees and in various combinations) to count as valuable outcomes of RE.

It is important to stress, though, that this flexible view of religious understanding(s) does not relativize everything that could be said about understanding in the context of RE to the point where the term loses all meaning. Returning to the question of whether and to what extent students of no theistic faith may grasp the significance of certain experiential aspects of theistic belief in the lives of believers, it is still possible to claim, for example, that those who do not have a relationship with the divine may be unable to understand this existential dimension of theistic belief *in the same way* as those who have a theistic faith. Yet, this does not matter if we acknowledge the necessary plurality, complexity and interrelatedness of insider and outsider perspectives on religious matters in RE because, from such a standpoint, *identification* with any religious perspective is neither the aim nor prerequisite of developing religious understanding. We may therefore ignore not just those general claims about the logical impossibility of non-confessional RE considered here (e.g. Hirst), which are based on the assumption that religious understanding requires first-hand (insider) experience of religious belief, but also particular claims about the inaccessibility of theistic faith experiences to outsiders of theistic belief when these are used as an argument against the inclusion of theological methods and curriculum contents in non-confessional RE – a point of view which will be further developed in the next chapter.

Before this, however, we need to consider and, if possible, define the more education-specific term 'religious literacy', clarifying as well how it can be distinguished from the more philosophical concept of religious understanding. This is necessary because the next part of this thesis concentrates on the topic of theological understanding in the context of multi-faith RE and the impact it has on students' religious literacy, understood here as a broader aim of RE. Or to be more specific, the goal to achieve (see second individual research objective in section 1.6) is to explore the potential role(s) a theologically orientated approach to RE, focused on the study of key theological content of different theistic religions, could play in developing students' religious literacy (in relation to theistic religions). To provide the required background to this discussion, the second half of this chapter will therefore look more closely at current literacy-centred debates in RE, including assumed links to the promotion of tolerance and social cohesion in RE; related views of the instrumental value of the study of religions in schools; and the question of what it might mean to become religiously literate in relation to theistic religions in this context.

## 4.2 Religious Literacy: An Investigation of Current Literacy-Centred Debates in Religious Education

Much of what was said in the above philosophical discussion of religious understanding applies in similar ways to the term 'religious literacy' since becoming literate in the field of religion is, of course, closely related to understanding religion(s), in short: the phenomenon/phenomena studied in RE. Thus, it is arguable, for instance, that the question of whether and how outsiders of religious belief may become religiously literate and what exactly that would entail is just as relevant to this debate as it was to the one considered above. However, simply equating the two terms ('understanding' and 'literacy') would not be correct because 'literacy' in the field of RE points to a different meaning and context. Again, to understand this, it helps to go back to the original meaning of the term 'literacy' as it is used in more general educational discussions about literacy in British primary and secondary education. There are many definitions of what it means to be literate. In the context of English as a school subject, literacy is usually conceived of as being able to read and write or, as Fred Inglis and Lesley Aers argue, more comprehensively, being able to read, write, speak and listen (Inglis & Aers, 2008, 32). Furthermore, certain qualifications of the term imply different ideological emphases: 'functional' or 'utilitarian literacy', for example, sees literacy as a means to an end such as integrating severely illiterate individuals into established economic and social values and practices (Lankshear, 1993, 91). 'Critical literacy' is concerned with bringing experiences of the world, school and literacy together, thereby empowering students to move in and around the school, schooling and the outside world as well as to engage critically with their surroundings (McDonald & Thornley, 2009).

A significant conceptualisation of literacy, from which we may derive implications for religious literacy, has been offered by Linda Flower who proposes the following five principles: first, literacy is a set of actions and transitions in which people use their reading and writing skills for personal and social purposes. Second, literacy is a move within a discourse practice. Third, becoming literate depends on knowledge of social conventions. Fourth, literacy requires 'how-to' knowledge, or basic foundational skills needed to carry out literate acts, by means of which people may learn to read situations, construct and negotiate meaning. And finally, being literate opens the door to metacognitive and social awareness (Flower, 1994). From this, we might work out a provisional definition of religious literacy as the acquisition of key competences such as knowing the grammar of religion and being able to understand and employ religious language in informed, meaningful ways; moving, professionally, within the discourse practices of the study of religions; and developing an awareness of religious conventions; dealing sensitively with potential areas of conflict; being conscious of the danger of religious and cultural stereotyping; etc.

This definition, however, is still somewhat vague and hence, in need of further specification. For instance, in contrast to the general criteria Flower offers, most of which seem to specify practical skills and competences requiring some type of activity as indicators of a person's literacy, my RE-specific modification is less practice-orientated. Thus, one could argue that some of the chosen terminology for the items I list as 'key competences' here are rather abstract in nature, e.g. '*understanding* religious language'; 'developing *awareness* of religious conventions'; and '*being conscious* of the dangers of stereotyping'. How – one could ask – would competences like these be visible in a student's behaviour, let alone assessed as potential success criteria for the development of religious literacy? In fact, one might even reason that only the aspect of 'employing religious language' meets Flower's practice-centred criteria because 'employing something' is a skill requiring active application and could thus, most likely, count as a demonstration of competence. However, it is my conviction that such a focus solely on practical (and hence, directly assessible?) competences in RE is not a useful one to adopt when defining a phenomenon as complex as religious literacy seems to be. Rather than limiting my view to those aspects that can be described in practical terms (e.g. used in the hope that this would make it easier to test the extent to which a student is religiously literate or not), I would rather suggest accepting the fact that the term 'competence' must be used very broadly, in the context of religious literacy, to include not just practical skills, but also the development of a certain *mindset* (e.g. openness to others' perspectives, resistance to prejudice, etc.), regardless of whether the concept then lends itself to a certain ineffability. I therefore propose two improvements of the above working definition, derived from Flower, to reflect, more accurately, the way in which the term 'religious literacy' is understood in this thesis: first, to re-structure the definition, according to practical (i.e. directly assessible) and more abstract (i.e. indirectly assessible) components; and second, to further specify what the latter group of desired learning outcomes involves. This leads me to the following, more detailed modification:

- Religious literacy involves practical and more abstract types of key competences: *practical skills* include being able to employ religious language in informed, meaningful ways (in particular, respective key concepts, doctrines, but also theories, themes and issues that are central to the study of individual religions or religion as a category of curriculum content); and being able to move, professionally, within the discourse practices of the study of religions (i.e. through practical training in research theories and methods in a range of disciplines including Religious Studies, Theology, Sociology, Philosophy, etc.).

- Moreover, becoming religiously literate involves the development of a certain critical, yet non-(pre-)judgmental mindset towards perspectives other than one's own. This includes the following, slightly more *abstract competences*: knowing the grammar of religion and being able to understand religious language and discourses in the study of religions; developing an awareness of religious conventions, customs and traditions; approaching the study of religions, critically, whilst remaining open to others' perspectives; dealing sensitively with potential areas of conflict and being conscious of religious and cultural stereotyping.

Despite these clarifications, however, I need to acknowledge that this interpretation of religious literacy has mainly been derived from an application of the principles underlying general definitions of literacy to the subject area of religion and might therefore not yet reflect sufficient insight from professional discourses of the school subject, multi-faith RE. The next section will therefore explore how, and for which purposes, the term 'religious literacy' is used in the context of Religious Education today – by taking a closer look at common, RE-specific definitions. As already done in the context of the philosophical debate about religious understanding (section 4.1), I will also consider some of the conceptions of religion(s) and the study of religions, identifiable in these definitions, as well as one problematic political agenda frequently cited in connection with the term – the aim of furthering tolerance and social cohesion through RE. What my criticisms of this latter trend in RE will show is that too much emphasis on the instrumental value of a literacy-centred RE (such as its possible contributions to social cohesion) takes our attention too far away from (e.g. theistic) religions as important phenomena that are, in certain respects at least, *worth being studied in their own right*. This will allow me to argue my case for an interreligious, theology-centred approach to non-confessional, multi-faith RE, justified on the grounds that a lack of focus on God (or the divine, more generally) will lead to questionable representations of theistic religions in RE classrooms, which diminishes, in turn, the level of religious literacy students may develop in relation to these traditions.

### 4.2.1 Religious Literacy in the Context of RE and Assumed Links to Tolerance and Social Cohesion

The education-specific debate about religious literacy has political connotations because it is linked to the question of the nature and purpose of RE and thereby, also to potential aims of the subject. Increased interest in these considerations is a relatively new phenomenon in the world of RE practice and research. In *Does RE Work?* (2013), Conroy et al. argue that the first decade of this millennium was dominated, first and foremost, by the drive to (re-)define the nature, aims and purposes of the RE curriculum – especially post-9/11 – and resulting discussions about pedagogies and theories of Religious Education. In fact, the main problem this report points out is that there are now so many different aims assigned to RE that they could easily be viewed as too many 'competing imperatives', making the task of RE teachers an almost impossible one to achieve (see Teece, 2011). These aims range from fostering religious literacy, offering sex and relationship education, promoting cultural awareness and tolerance of religious diversity thereby contributing to social cohesion, to furthering students' moral, social and spiritual development (Conroy et al., 2013). This research development was also criticised in the 2010 Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) report, which saw the ongoing debate as a source of confusion/uncertainty about the subject's 'core purposes' that does not help teachers in any significant way to improve their classroom practice (Ofsted, 2010, 42). Most recently, however, (maybe as a response to these excessive demands imposed on the subject), a new trend has become visible within the research community of Religious Education, which is closely related to the philosophical debate about religious knowledge and understanding, namely the increasingly obvious preference of many researchers to identify and promote religious literacy as a primary aim for modern multi-faith RE. As mentioned in chapter 1 (section 1.7), this emphasis on the importance of furthering religious literacy, specifically in schools without a religious affiliation, is evident in recent reports and projects such as *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward – A National Plan for RE* (Commission on Religious Education, 2018); Understanding Christianity (Church of England Office project); *Improving Religious Literacy*

(All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education, 2016); *Living with Difference: Community, Diversity and the Common Good* (Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life, 2015); *RE for REal: The Future of Teaching and Learning about Religion and Belief* (Dinham & Shaw, 2015); and *A New Settlement: Religion & Belief in Schools* (Clarke & Woodhead, 2015).

Other publications concerned with religious literacy, which either come from British contributors or from American researchers who have impacted on the current discussion about RE in England and Wales, are: Adam Dinham & Matthew Francis (2015), Diane Moore (2014, 2015), Stephen Prothero (2008) and Andrew Wright (1993). Evidence for the fact that this research trend relates to the topics of religious knowledge and understanding can be found in the mere fact that almost all definitions of religious literacy put forward in these publications, as diverse as they may otherwise be, use the verb 'understand' or the noun 'understanding' as key explanatory terms. Thus, the definition employed by the Religious Literacy Project initiated by Moore at Harvard Divinity School states that religiously literate people will possess, amongst other things, 'a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions', and also points to the 'importance of understanding religions and religious influences *in context* and as *inextricably woven into all dimensions of human experience'* (see Harvard Divinity School, Religious Literacy Project, 4, emphases in the text).

Yet, as the above philosophical debate revealed, it is important to clarify what exactly we mean by 'understanding' in the context of religion and the study of religion(s), in particular. This is most evident if we look, again, at the most frequently cited CoRE report of 2018, *Religion and Worldviews* (compare section 1.3). In a similar context, Hannam and Biesta criticise, for instance, that the Commission's propositions are based on a problematic view of understanding which, rather than only being suggestive of certain educational (here: hermeneutical) methods, constitutes in itself a whole worldview, identified by them as 'hermeneuticism' (Hannam & Biesta, 2019). They claim that the report's:

> 'choice for the idea of "world view" clearly reveals the frame of the report itself – a "frame" we suggest referring to as "hermeneuticism". "Hermeneuticism" stands for the idea that (1) the human being is fundamentally a sense-making and meaning-making being; (2) that his or her being in the world is mainly (…) a matter of sense- or meaning-making; and (3) that religious and non-religious world views play a key role in such sense-making. Although there is some acknowledgement [in the report] that world views are about more than beliefs – reference is made to practices (…), which means that world views are not

> entirely seen as cognitive belief systems – it is also very clear that world views are basically understood as "frames" for sense-making.' (Hannam & Biesta, 2019, 56, my insertion)

What is criticised here, one could summarise then (in the same way as I have done in the case of Hannam's main argument in section 4.1.2), is the report's simplistic conceptualisation of religions as 'cognitive belief systems', which arguably ignores the (perhaps, more important) *existential* dimension of religion or 'being religious', more precisely. Drawing on Hannam (2019), they therefore conclude, understanding in RE should 'be considered first of all in terms of what it means to live with a religious or non-religious orientation, conceived in existential terms, rather than beliefs or practices' (Hannam & Biesta, 2019, 55). As argued in section 4.1.2, however, it can be objected, that exchanging one singular conception of religion/being religious for another, equally simplistic one may not be the best choice for multi-faith RE as it does not do justice to the great complexity of the phenomenon of religion. The present study therefore seeks to provide an approach to exploring theological content in RE that, despite its potentially cognitive focus on concepts and doctrines, balances a number of different conceptualisations of religion, including existential ones (see chapter 6). (Another reply to Hannam and Biesta's criticism of the report, recently offered by Cooling, will be considered in section 6.2.3.)

If we look at a few examples of definitions of religious literacy, offered for the context of RE, we will see that this investigation of underlying assumptions about the nature of religion(s) – and motivations for studying them – is an important one to undertake. One of the first propositions was offered by Andrew Wright in his *Religious Education in the Secondary School: Prospects for Religious Literacy*, published in 1993. According to this critical realist view on what it means to be religiously literate in today's plural society, students should primarily enquire about absolute truth on the basis of both a personal and academic engagement with ultimate questions (Wright, 1993). Such an idea of religious literacy, however, views what it means to be religious, first and foremost, as a matter of having propositional beliefs and asserting that these beliefs are true (compare Hannam, 2019, 7), which could also be seen, critically, as a rather narrow conception of the religious, thus providing students with only a limited view of what religions mean to individuals and communities around the world, how they see themselves, what they (aim to) do and why, and how they interact with societies in different contexts and times.

By comparison, North American researcher Prothero has provided a more complex definition of religious literacy, based on a multifaceted view of religion. In 2008, Prothero conducted a quantitative study of religious literacy in the US context, in which he defined the term as 'the ability to understand and use the religious terms, symbols, images, beliefs, practices, scriptures, heroes, themes and stories that are employed in American public life' (Prothero, 2008, 13). Focusing on a variety of aspects of religion(s), one might suggest, this definition is more capable of recognising (and hence revealing to students) the complex, yet interrelated dimensions of which individual religions consist and might therefore contribute to students' understanding of the diversity that exists both within and between religions. Moreover, another advantage of this definition is that, apart from revealing the multifaceted nature of religion(s), it also tells us something about the complexity of the term 'religious literacy' itself. Thus, it is arguable that it is in fact more accurate to speak of 'literacies' in the plural form in the context of learning about and understanding religion(s) – or sub-categories of religious literacy – such as, in the case of Prothero's definition, 'denominational', 'confessional', 'interreligious', but also 'narrative' and 'ritual' literacies (see Gallagher, 2009). In addition to this, David Carr's definition of religious literacy adds the following nuance to the question of what it means to become religiously literate in RE. Apart from taking into account individual facets within the conception of religious literacy itself, Carr suggests, it is necessary to be aware of the connections the term has with other types of knowledge, skills and awareness. Focusing on what I termed 'abstract competences' above, he stresses, for example, how important it is to realise that religious literacy is intimately related to political, social and economic types of *awareness*, that it has links with historical knowledge and also requires (as well as furthers, I would add) *understanding* of other aspects of life in societies past and present including art, culture and literature (Carr, 2007).

And even more recently – with yet another potential aspect of religious literacy in mind – Paul Smalley has put the emphasis on students' *interaction* with people from a diversity of religious backgrounds. For him, religious literacy is therefore 'the ability to interact fluently with the ideas and customs of any religious group commonly found in our local or global society by having a conceptual understanding of religion, such that one can identify and appreciate the reciprocal influence of these groups on public policy, government, society, culture and indeed daily life' (Smalley, 2018, 60). Here, one might ask what exactly is meant by 'interacting fluently with religious ideas and customs' – surely, this must refer to *interacting with religious people* (e.g. by engaging in informed dialogue with them about their religious ideas and customs) and doing so *in constructive ways*, that is not in an atmosphere of mutual distrust or rejection. If I interpret Smalley's motivation correctly, the appeal to (presumably constructive) interaction therefore allows for associations with another objective, frequently cited in current debates about the aims and purposes of RE and in connection with the promotion of religious literacy, namely the development of students' tolerance, respect for others' worldviews and social cohesion in modern plural societies.

One might object to this interpretation by saying that tolerance and respect are internal mental states and therefore belong to the more abstract type of competences described in my own definition above. Smalley, on the other hand, seems to be more concerned with practical types of interaction with a diversity of people. The link between his definition and the values of tolerance and respect in RE might therefore be drawn unnecessarily. However, I would reply to this argument that, given the assumed constructive type of practical interaction which is implied in Smalley's view of religious literacy, a certain development, e.g. of a critical, yet non-(pre-)judgmental mindset on the basis of which fruitful interaction with others takes place, is the prerequisite for Smalley's proposition, regardless of whether the latter focuses more on how such a mindset would ultimately manifest itself in actions.

Now, there is of course nothing wrong about seeing respect and tolerance for others as important values to develop and share in RE classrooms (my own definition of religious literacy involves these aspects as well), but assuming a *causal link* between a person's religious literacy and such respectful/tolerant attitudes is a different matter and – as we will see later – one for which there is not much empirical evidence. Moreover, even if it were true that religious literacy furthers constructive interaction between people of different faiths/worldviews, putting these two concerns at the top of the list of aims to achieve in

RE (compare Plater, 2016[51]) is problematic as it might lead to an instrumentalist view of the subject that no longer sees religions as objects of study that, to some extent at least, are worth being studied in their own right. Key questions this raises for the present study are, for example: how can a literacy-centred RE, based on such a view of the main purposes and functions of the subject, ensure that religious traditions are represented as adequately as possible in the classroom and with a special concern for their individual self-understandings, which in the case of theistic religions arguably requires a certain methodological God-centredness? How can students develop a broad understanding of what religions are, what they do and what it means to be religious for different people in different contexts? And most importantly, perhaps, how and for which reasons could students then be initiated into the rich world of (inter-)disciplinary practices central to the academic study of religions, including theological ones (e.g. of the non-confessional type promoted in this thesis)? Before examining these issues more closely, however, I will provide some more comments on the social cohesion debate as these will reveal important links to the question of representation.

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[51] An example of the fact that religious literacy and social cohesion tend to be regarded as central (and potentially related) aims of RE today can be found in an online survey conducted by Mark Plater in 2015. The survey confirms that many members of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACRE) share this view on the importance of promoting religious literacy and social cohesion in RE today. This survey, which examined the views of 513 SACRE members on the aims and purposes of Religious Education, has found that a large proportion of this group of people currently regards religious literacy as one of the top aims in Religious Education (Plater, 2016). Specifically, Plater explains: 'When asked to choose between various possible aims for RE, participants ranked them in the following order of importance: 1 Religious literacy (m = 2.832); 2 Personal development (m = 3.24); 3 Social Cohesion (m = 3.29); 4 Challenge (i.e. critiquing everyday assumptions) (m = 3.67); 5 Heritage (understanding how religion has shaped our culture) (m = 4.17); 6 Nurture (of personal faith) (m = 5.31); 7 Achievement of good grades and qualifications (m = 5.5)' (Plater, 2016, 57) Similar trends were confirmed when Plater applied two other questioning techniques. Thus, religious literacy was given the second highest score when participants were offered a Likert system for scaling responses, in which case the mean score for religious literacy (here, also called 'competency' by Plater) was 1.56, just behind 'understanding of other people and cultures' (Plater, 2016, 57). And the same emphasis on religious literacy as one of the top aims of RE was reflected in the participants' choices of selected quotations, with the difference that quotes to do with social cohesion were regarded as slightly more important than those focusing on religious literacy in this section of the questionnaire (Plater, 2016, 58). One might object, however, that Plater's choice of terminology – especially his decision to use the terms 'literacy' and 'competency' more or less interchangeably – is not very helpful as it implies that the meanings of the two connotations are identical. This raises the question as to which type of understanding of religious literacy may have informed the study in its planning stages and whether participants would have evaluated the significance of religious literacy in slightly different ways, had it not been also referred to as 'competency' in some parts of the study – a term which is, arguably, vaguer and hence, also broader (as it does not include any intentional object) than religious literacy. (Plater's survey was completed by 513 SACRE members, representing 131 of the 152 SACRES in the UK.)

### 4.2.2 The Problem of the Instrumentalization of RE: Back to a Focus on (Theistic) Religions as Important Objects of Study?

An example of such an apparently instrumentalist view of religious literacy (aimed at the promotion of social cohesion) can be found in the 2016 report of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Religious Education. The report lists four main defining features of religious literacy, of which one is described as a form of knowledge, two are expressed as certain types of awareness, and one is termed an ability. First, religiously literate people in British society must have 'knowledge about both the particular beliefs, practices and traditions of the main religious traditions in Britain, and of the shape of our changing religious landscape today'. Second, they need to possess an 'awareness of how beliefs, inherited traditions and textual interpretations might manifest into the actions, practices and daily lives of individuals', thereby recognising the great diversity that exists both between and within religions. Third, religiously literate people should cultivate in themselves a 'critical awareness' through which they may 'recognise, analyse and critique religious stereotypes'. And fourth, they need to develop a 'sophisticated ability to engage with religious groups in a way which promotes respect and plurality' (APPG, 2016, 6).

The first thing one notices when looking at the exact wording of these four principles (in particular, the use of the term 'awareness' in statements 2 and 3) is that – as with many of the other definitions considered above – the meaning of religious literacy conveyed in this description is not quite clear as it does not distinguish between practical and more abstract types of competences (see my definition at the start of section 4.2). This makes it difficult to see what exactly this view of religious literacy entails both in practice and at the level of what could be called 'mindset formation'. The second principle, for instance, requires students to develop an *awareness* of how people's beliefs become manifest in everyday actions. Yet, it is unclear whether, and if so in which way, such an awareness would differ from simple knowledge about this fact. The *Cambridge English Dictionary* defines awareness as a 'knowledge that something exists, or understanding of a situation or subject […] based on information or experience' (The Cambridge English Dictionary Online). Although it might perhaps be argued that awareness differs from knowledge insofar as it is possible to be aware of the presence of something, perceiving it rather nebulously without ever possessing much factual knowledge about the given phenomenon, it is questionable whether such an idea of understanding religious phenomena would be a positive one to pursue in RE. Furthermore, if the term 'awareness' is not used as a synonym for knowledge based on information/experience and the resulting religious understanding students might gain from it, the third principle (students of RE should develop a 'critical awareness' through which they may 'recognise, analyse and critique religious stereotypes') becomes greatly more difficult to understand. Thus, we might ask, for instance: what is the difference between being aware of and recognising religious stereotypes? If these expressions, too, are more or less identical, are students then meant to develop an *awareness through which to become aware* and is this even possible? Or, and this seems to be more likely, is the second skill (awareness) in the list of three skills used quasi synonymously with the other two so that the third principle could be re-articulated as 'the *knowledge and ability* to recognise, analyse and critique religious stereotypes'? Yet, even if this is what the APPG had in mind when proposing their view on religious literacy, clarifying the term 'awareness' alone is not enough to eliminate the vagueness from this definition. One could criticise, for instance, that such an implicit stress on the role of knowledge in becoming religiously literate in RE makes little sense without some form of identification of what exactly it is that students should learn and hence, come to know in RE. With the exception of the two very general hypernyms 'beliefs' and 'practices', however, such an identification of subject content is missing from this definition.

Looking again at the way these four principles are worded and what each of them puts at the centre of learning provides insights into why there is such little focus on curriculum content in this definition. According to the APPG, the main reasons why it is important for students to become religiously literate in and through RE is so that they may be aware of Britain's changing cultural landscape; develop tolerance of religious diversity and the ability to critique religious stereotypes, thereby cultivating respect for plurality in modern British society. In other words, the focus guiding this definition is not so much on what needs to be studied (subject content) and how (methods), but on a specific interpretation of the purpose of RE seen as most relevant to living in plural societies, namely furthering social cohesion. Arguably, this is because the stress in this view of religious literacy is on what you *do* with the knowledge/awareness of the subject content and methods encountered in RE, which constitutes a drift from focusing on RE – and what potential learning outcomes of this type of education might be – towards *creating a socially acceptable purpose for RE*. Yet, even if we agree that such a question (what is the purpose of RE?) is an important one to ask in this context, the answer provided here (tolerance/social cohesion) is debatable.

Drawing on Mary Hickman, Helen Crowley and Nick Mai's final report on the research project *Immigration and Social Cohesion in the UK* from 2008, we may interpret the term, 'social cohesion', to denote the degree to which individuals in a given culturally and socially diverse society identify with and feel included in both their local communities as well as society as a whole and therefore, experience a sense of 'belonging' and 'trust in life'. As Hickman et al. clarify, however, for most people, this is more 'about the negotiation of the right balance between separateness and unity, rather than about having total consensus on shared values and priorities' (Hickman, Crowley, & Mai, 2008, xiii). As we have seen above, there is no doubt that the concept of social cohesion[52] has had a great influence on UK politics and education post-9/11 and especially so, on the pedagogical development of multi-faith RE at primary and secondary school level (specifically, in non-denominational, state-maintained schools). In *Religious Education and Social and Community Cohesion* (2010), Michael Grimmitt describes this development as follows: whereas publicly funded RE had gone through a relatively stable state between 1988 and 2000, balancing the two attainment targets 'learning about' and 'from' religion, and using a wide range of pedagogies including experiential and phenomenological models, these well-established theories and practices of RE were no longer considered adequate responses to the 'globalised and politicised religion' emerging in public discourses in the years following the September-11 attacks (Grimmitt, 2010). More than before, the subject thus faced the challenge to explore controversial issues (e.g. religion and conflict) in ways that create respect for diversity and cooperation between people holding different, religious and non-religious, views (Grimmitt, 2010). The APPG's definition of religious literacy as a means to promote social cohesion could hence be interpreted as an expression of this type of thinking. One of the earliest sources of evidence, post-9/11, of this impact can be found in the Ofsted invitation conference of the year 2002: Teaching for Tolerance?. I will consider some of the conclusions made at this conference in a slightly different context later on, when looking more closely at potential links between religious literacy as a driving force for tolerance and the question of adequate representation of religions in the classroom (section 4.2.3).

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[52] For a more detailed examination of the notions of social and community cohesion and their influence on recent UK policy-making see Radcliffe's and Newman's (Eds.) *Promoting Social Cohesion* (P. Radcliffe & Newman, 2011). This work also explores the difficult ontological status of the concept 'cohesion', saying: 'Cohesion, in the sense of a stable society, is clearly a *sine qua non* for most contemporary societies. As to whether the particular route to such an end is desirable, however, depends on the balance of consent and coercion. Put very simply, a police state may generate stable polity and cohesive society *de facto* but would be unacceptable in a modern democracy' (Radcliffe & Newman, 2011, 2-3). For this reason, Radcliffe and Newman conclude that it is better to see cohesion as an aspiration: 'it would be difficult to conceive of a society devoid of internal conflicts and tensions'; it is a 'relative, rather than absolute, state' (Radcliffe & Newman, 2011, 10).

What is problematic about this view of religious literacy, directly connected to tolerance and social cohesion, one might object, is that it instrumentalizes the study of religion(s) in schools by seeing it primarily as a vehicle for social cohesion in an increasingly multicultural and religiously pluralistic world, which overlooks the possibility that learning about religion(s) might also be an important educational end in itself. However, this statement requires, of course, further differentiation. While I am not intending to deny that primary and secondary education (at least as it is currently undertaken, e.g. in Western societies), including all academic subjects studied at these stages, always directs itself towards external (i.e. economic, social, political, ethical, etc.) goals, thereby allowing individual subjects and their respective curriculum content to be instrumental to certain broader aims, I would call into question the frequency and matter-of-factness with which this seems to be done in the case of RE today. My appeal to the value of religions as aspects of human life worth being studied in their own right, should therefore not be understood in absolute, but rather in *relative* terms. In the case of theistic religions, I would argue, for example, that even though studying theistic faith traditions in schools may not be an 'intrinsically valuable activity' (i.e. in the sense that there is something intrinsically good about knowing theistic religions over other phenomena in the world), it is valuable in the 'self-evidently' relative sense that it contributes to students' general development of a wide range of understandings of and knowledge about the world that surrounds them, of which both the phenomenon of theism (as an abstract concept or idea) and individual theistic traditions (as practical manifestations) are important parts.

At first glance, it might seem, this view is reminiscent of Jeff Astley's Everest metaphor, formulated by him in 1988 as an illustration of how phenomenologists would justify teaching about Christianity in schools. If we extend this metaphor to include the study of non-Christian religions, Astley's argument could be summarised as follows: major religions and spiritualities must be studied and taught – as Everest must be climbed – simply because *they are there* and form part of the world that surrounds us. They are significant in terms of the number of their adherents around the globe and in terms of the effects they have on history, culture(s) as well as society/-ies in an increasingly globalised world (compare Astley, 1988, 86). I need to clarify, though, that this is not exactly what I intend to say about the significance of religions/study of religions here. First of all, one could object, the metaphor is rather weak because Mount Everest simply *need not* be climbed and in fact, never was – for the majority of human history. Second, (as Astley's formulation correctly implies) the mere fact that religions and spiritualities have large numbers of adherents around the world and influence human history, culture(s), etc. makes them 'significant', but not necessarily 'valuable'. I would therefore specify that the fact that (theistic) religions are 'there' in the sense described above makes *them* important – and *the study of them* valuable. (This is because I assume it is reasonable to see the study of important things as valuable.) It is in this relative sense that I mean (theistic) religions are worth being studied in their own right. This important viewpoint, I would argue, is lost if we identify an external goal such as social cohesion as the main, or even sole, purpose of RE because this could create the impression that, without such a (here: political/social/ethical) function of the study of religions, the phenomenon of religion itself would not be an important focus in a young person's (general) education.

If we return to the APPG's definition of religious literacy, we will see that this group is aware of the problem of the potential (over-)instrumentalization of RE and wants to distance itself from any such accusations. The way it does so, however, seems rather inconsistent. Even though the foreword of the report mentions in one sentence that RE in itself should not be viewed as a 'vehicle for policy objectives […] or religious integration', it also argues, much more vehemently, that the central aim of the subject, religious literacy, due to 'the realities of life in modern Britain', must always be a 'pragmatic endeavour' which has at its heart the desire to 'enable communities and individuals to understand each other better […] and promote community cohesion[53] within a more inclusive and holistic society' (APPG, 2016, 1).

Arguably, the problem with such an understanding of religious literacy lies not so much in the assertion that the study of religion(s) may not have independent value in absolute terms because, as mentioned above, educational intentions, especially in Western contexts, are always directed towards external or simply, broader goals in one way or another. What remains problematic, however, is the question of whether the ways and contexts in which the various subject-specific skills and competencies potentially gained in the process of becoming literate in the field of RE should be pre-determined and thereby, limited in advance to one desired outcome, in this case furthering tolerance of religious and cultural diversity. Another complication, revealed in this interpretation of religious literacy, is that it bases its recommendations, whether consciously or not, on a particular understanding of the relationship between aims, objects of study and methods, which often remains an unstated premise in the overall argument for literacy-centred RE. Thus, one might suppose, for example, that the APPG's emphasis on practical engagement with people of different faiths and social cohesion in the daily lives of individuals could implicitly promote methodological approaches to RE focusing on the students' moral development by prioritising aspects of Grimmitt's 'learning from' religion(s) such as the different versions of experiential RE[54] or Grimmitt's own human development model (see chapter 3, section 3.2) over approaches that ascribe a greater importance to 'learning about' religion(s) in a more traditional academic way or seek to create a balance between the two. Trying to draw links between lesson content and the personal life of the students, some religious educators, adopting such an approach, might therefore view individual subjective experience and ethical considerations aimed at instilling in the students an appreciation for religious and cultural diversity as the most important focal points of the study of religions.

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[53] It should be noted that the terms 'community cohesion' and 'social cohesion', despite the more local/regional focus of the former expression, seem to be used interchangeably here as there is no clear definition of this new term, or distinction from social cohesion, given in the APPG text.

As indicated above, however, one concern I have with potential methodological choices like these is that it is difficult to see how students would then develop an understanding of the great internal and external diversity of individual religious traditions, let alone how they would gain insight into the self-understandings of the religions and religious branches they study – e.g. learning how insiders see their own tradition. In other words, a literacy-centred RE, primarily aimed at furthering tolerance and social cohesion, might fail to represent religions, adequately, in the classroom, i.e. with a focus on the great complexity of the overall phenomenon of religion as well as the multifaceted nature of individual traditions. Furthermore, I would claim, this is particularly problematic in the context of theistic faith traditions because, due to the lack of focus on God/the divine in multi-faith Religious Education which recent research identifies (see section 1.2), these types of religions are already said to be misrepresented more, perhaps, than non-theistic traditions and worldviews, in RE as it is. The final section of this chapter will therefore consider if and how developing students' religious literacy in relation to theistic religions in RE might also be dependent on the subject's success in providing God-centred representation(s) of these traditions.

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[54] Examples of experiential approaches to RE can be found in Smart (1968), Smart & Horder (1976), Goldman (1964, 1965), Loukes (1961, 1965).

This thought process is based, in turn, on the assumption that, to understand theistic belief, it is important to gain insights into many different self-understandings of theistic traditions (and branches of them). These self-understandings are reflected, for example, in the various ways in which their adherents see both God/the divine and their own relationships with God/the divine as lived and experienced in their personal and communal lives. An important focus for the promotion of adequate representation(s) of theistic religions is therefore the question as to what it means to have a theistic faith for believers in the divine. Why and to what extent such 'insider' views are emphasised in the theologically orientated approach promoted in this study will be explained in chapter 6 where I will argue for a particular type of theology-centred RE that aims to *balance different conceptualisations of religion*s, including such believer-focused/life-centred ones.

### 4.2.3 Becoming Religiously Literate in Relation to Theistic Traditions: A Question of Adequate Representation(s) of Theistic Faith and Practice?

A useful source to consider when examining potential links between religious literacy and the representation of religious traditions in RE classrooms is the report, *Materials used to Teach about World Religions in Schools in England*, published by the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) in 2010. This report also centres upon RE's contribution to social cohesion but – in contrast to the APPG's take on religious literacy, for example – rejects the possibility of a causal link between students' religious education and their development of respect and tolerance for others, *without accurate 'learning about' religion and religions in RE.* Concentrating specifically on the quality of textbooks/resources used to teach about religions in England and Wales, the report suggests, not just religious literacy but also community cohesion objectives are served most effectively if the materials used in RE represent religions in a balanced and adequate way and increase 'knowledge of the beliefs, practices, motivations and values of people of the six principal traditions in British society' (DCSF, 2010, 12). Here, it is evident then, the stress is not so much on learning from, but on learning about religious beliefs and practices, and it is assumed a literacy-orientated, knowledge-based approach to RE, aimed at adequate representations of religions, has the power to foster, among students, tolerance of others' perspectives and a sense of unity in diversity in British plural society.

This is important because, as indicated above, the validity of arguments for a *general* causal relationship between religious literacy and social cohesion (i.e. 'general' in the sense that it ignores the question of how to represent religions in suitable ways) is very questionable as there is little empirical evidence for such a connection. Thus, one could easily think of practical examples where detailed factual knowledge about religious practices can be used for destructive purposes including hate crimes. In 2001, two days after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, for instance, a man left ten pigs' heads and fake blood in the car park of Exeter mosque – next to a banner that said: 'The blood of the American people is on the hands of all Muslims' (BBC News, 2002). This shows that this man's knowledge about Muslim dietary restrictions (i.e. that eating pork is prohibited or *haram* in Islam for religious reasons), although interpretable perhaps as a sign of his religious literacy, was used in this particular case with an Islamophobic intention and hence, to divide rather than unify society both at a national British level, but given its global connection to US politics, also 'Western society' at large, as it seems. A similar conclusion was drawn at the above-mentioned Teaching for Tolerance conference of 2002. Among other things, the report of this Ofsted Invitation conference states:

> 'Inspection evidence points to the following: (…) There is often an assumption that simply to teach about religions automatically fosters positive attitudes towards them. Yet overheard pupil talk and pupil responses to some resources, mainly visual images, suggest that this assumption is over-optimistic.' (Teaching for Tolerance, 2002)

To increase the chances that RE fosters tolerance, the report therefore concluded: (i) it must be ensured that resources do not portray a stereotypical view of religion; (ii) RE should use the principles of interfaith dialogue in the classroom as a method of respectful discourse; (iii) it should make connections between students' experiences and the experiences of believers as a path to understanding; (iv) and make ideas (e.g. about God, life, morality, death) rather than practices the focus of the curriculum since they are more likely to engage teenagers than pilgrimages, rites of passage, sacred texts, etc. which are often not relevant to their own lives.

This reveals that the relationship between religious literacy and social cohesion is much more complex than often assumed. That the question of adequate representation of religions plays a significant role in it is visible both in the criteria named in the DCFS report and in the conference conclusions. A closer consideration of the case of the Exeter man also illustrates this. Analysing the extent to which this person's criminal act can really be seen as a sign of religious literacy, one might wonder, for example, if the man who committed the hate crime would have behaved in the same way (and formed the same very over-simplistic, general opinions about Muslims), had he learned about the great internal diversity of the Islamic tradition and recognised, perhaps, the possible political functionalisation of religion, here: by Islamic militants.

It is on the basis of this argumentation that the present study justifies its focus on the representation of theistic religions in multi-faith RE and criticises that a lack of focus on belief in God – the defining feature of theism – is likely to diminish students' chances of developing adequate (i.e. complex and balanced) knowledge and understanding(s) of these traditions. This suggests that a focus on theological curriculum content (such as theological concepts and teachings of different theistic religions), as a means to provide more adequate representation(s) of theistic belief in RE, is an important element in developing students' religious literacy in relation to theistic religions. This view seems to be confirmed in the DCSF report when it states that one of the areas of special concern is that 'the value of RE materials for increasing understanding of the six principal religions is often compromised by inaccuracy, imbalance and lack of depth in their portrayal' whereas critical thinking is given a much higher priority (DCSF, 2010, 3). As criteria for teachers to assess the representation of religions in their classrooms the reviewers suggest among other things: 'recognition of each religion's complexity' and '*acknowledgement of the spiritual/numinous'* as important areas of investigation in each tradition (DCSF, 2010, 4, my emphasis).

This is why the possibility of theology's marginalisation in non-confessional RE and the reported lack of emphasis on theological understanding(s) are such critical issues: if we (re-) consider current debates about religious literacy with this theology-centred argument in mind, we may reasonably come to the conclusion that a crucial aspect in this discussion has been widely and regrettably ignored in RE research and practice to this day. That is *the potential role that gaining theological understanding(s)* (e.g. as defined in this study) *plays in becoming religiously literate in relation to theistic religions in RE* in schools without a religious affiliation. Thus, it is important to note that, despite the fact that at least five of the six principal religions studied in RE are either theistic in nature or have theistic aspects (see my definition of theism in section 1.4), the RE-centred definitions of religious literacy provided by others which I have considered here do not seem to assign the study of belief in God (or ultimate reality) a significant role in furthering students' literacy in religious matters at all. Wright puts the emphasis on ultimate truth discoverable in ultimate questions (e.g. relating to the meaning of life and death) at the heart of literacy in RE (1993). Prothero, although listing a wide range of religious phenomena and practices to be used and understood by religiously literate citizens, does not mention God explicitly in the context of any of them (2008). Smalley sees fluent interaction with religious people as most important in being religiously literate in plural societies, which arguably entails engaging in dialogue about their beliefs and practices, but it is unclear whether understanding theistic belief plays any significant role in this interaction at all (2018). And neither the APPG's definition, nor reports like *RE for REal* (Dinham & Shaw, 2015), or *Religion And Worldviews* (Commission on Religious Education, 2018) put a particular emphasis on God-centred learning in the context of theistic religions in their lists of focal points in the study of religions in RE.

This is concerning as there is certainly a great deal to be learned from an engagement with theological subject matter when it comes to studying theistic religions in multi-faith RE. In a recent article reflecting on insights gained from the *Does RE Work?* report five years after its publication, David Lundie explains not just why this is important, but also *how* theological understanding should be promoted in RE:

> 'While theological literacy has much to commend it [in the overall task of furthering pupils' understanding of the role played by religion in their own life world], this too has often been subject to a sorites-like pressure to cover quantity, more so under recent curriculum reforms [post-2016]. In place of an attempt to apprehend the ways in which religions ground meaning in an understanding of, and relation to, final Reality, what often emerges is a concern with enumerating doctrines, debatable issues and source texts (…) the heaping of doctrines, texts and definitions, in the absence of an *organising principle*, distorts the capacity of pedagogical activity to appear purposive to any end other than the rote learning of definitions.' (Lundie, 2018, 353-354, my insertions and emphasis)

This suggests two things: first, theological understanding is crucial to developing religious literacy in multi-faith RE. And second, the methods or teaching strategies used in order to further theological understanding(s) should be systematic in the sense that they are structured around an 'organising principle' suitable to both object of study (here: God/the divine and the ways in which religions ground meaning in relation to God/the divine) and the desired learning outcome (theological understanding). These two realisations guide the critical analysis of the potential role and significance of theology in multi-faith RE and my development of an alternative, interreligious view of theology suitable for non-confessional RE in religiously unaffiliated schools in chapters 5 and 6, respectively. Thus, the main focus of the next chapter will be on the question of how theological understanding and religious literacy might be related and/or depend on one another in the context of non-confessional, multi-faith RE (and what conditions theology should fulfil to be able to function as a positive contribution in this educational setting). And the subsequent chapter, in order to develop a ‘systematic’ approach to theology of the kind Lundie seems to suggest, will be concerned with providing an interreligious approach to exploring theological content in RE, structured around the organising principle of the idea of the centrality of transcendence in religious belief.

# 5 Theological Understanding and its Potential Role in Promoting Religious Literacy in Multi-Faith RE

As explained above, one of the most important tasks of this discussion about the role of *theological understanding* in non-confessional, multi-faith RE in religiously unaffiliated schools is to define what is meant by this term in the present thesis. For this, it helps to consider, briefly at least, whether the notions of theological understanding and theological literacy could (and should) be defined and differentiated, using the same distinction of philosophical/education-specific debates in RE as I have done in the case of religious understanding and literacy in the previous chapter. My answer would be: even though it is theoretically possible to draw the same distinction between a more general, philosophical application of the word 'understanding' in the context of theological curriculum content and the more recent, slightly politicised, use of the education-specific term 'theological literacy', it makes more sense to choose 'theological understanding' as an umbrella term to define and employ throughout this thesis. The reasons for this decision are simple. Due to the contested position of theology within Religious Education – as an approach that has been and continues to be suspected of undermining the values of non-confessional, multi-faith RE – it has been argued by various researchers in this field of study that there is generally little focus on promoting theological understanding in RE practice and research today (see Conroy, 2016; Conroy et al., 2013; Cooling, 2010; Copley, 2005; Ipgrave, 2009; Roebben, 2016; Strhan, 2010; Teece, 2005, 2010c). Moreover, the few times RE researchers have employed the term 'theological literacy' with regard to Religious Education (Chipperton, Georgiou, & Wright's discussion paper Rethinking RE: Religious Literacy, Theological Literacy and Theological Enquiry, 2016, is one such rare example to be considered in this chapter), 'understanding' and 'literacy' are often used almost interchangeably and without much specification of potential differences. One might even go as far as to suspect that 'theological literacy' in RE has simply been derived from the popular term 'religious literacy', understood as a central aim or desired outcome of the subject, and hence, tends to be employed rather thoughtlessly, without regard to differences in meaning between literacy and understanding in the context of theology. To avoid such unwanted confusions and for other reasons explained below, my study will concentrate primarily on defining and promoting the usefulness of *theological understanding(s)* as a general term for what students may develop when studying the theological dimensions of different theistic religions – specifically, key concepts, beliefs, teachings and practices relating to God, gods or ultimate reality. In other words, theological understanding is defined here mainly in terms of its *objects of study* (theological concepts and doctrines, etc.) and could also be referred to as 'understanding of theological curriculum content'. In contrast to the former chapter, however, a more precise explanation of why I have chosen to define this key term – as well as theology itself, as we will see below – in terms of their *objects of study* (e.g. as opposed to a methodological lens through which RE curriculum content could be regarded), will evolve out of the main discussion of the potential relationship of theological understanding and religious literacy in multi-faith RE, rather than being included here as a separate, preparatory step in my overall argument.

With this 'preview' of my RE-specific definition of theology/theological understanding in mind, we may begin our exploration of the relationship between theological understanding and religious literacy, understood as a broader aim of Religious Education. As we have seen in chapter 4, section 4.2, one thing upon which most definitions of religious literacy seem to agree is that gaining knowledge and understanding(s) of religious beliefs and practices of different traditions is an integral part of becoming religiously literate in multi-faith RE. Unfortunately, though, this does not mean that there is also consensus about the ways in which beliefs and practices should be studied and what curriculum content would ultimately be defined in this way. Specifically, the question of how important it is to teach about beliefs and practices relating to God, gods or ultimate reality (summarised here in the more general term: 'the divine') remains unanswered if we consider individual definitions of religious literacy such as those offered by Wright (1993), Prothero (2008), Gallagher (2009), Smalley (2018), the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education (2016), the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (2013) and most recently, the Commission on Religious Education (2018) (compare section 4.2). However, given that belief in God or some type of absolute reality is without doubt a constituent element of religious belief in all monotheistic and polytheistic religions, it is arguable that developing some form of theological understanding of religions plays a crucial role in learning about religious beliefs in multi-faith Religious Education, and thereby developing religious literacy as a broader aim of RE. Yet, the extent to which this is the case and how the relationship between theological and religious literacy should ultimately be defined is disputed.

In response to these questions, I will show in this chapter that attitudes to the potential value of furthering students' understanding(s) of the theological dimensions (i.e. concepts, teachings and beliefs about the divine) of different religions, as a means to contribute to the development of students' religious literacy in RE, strongly depend on how we define ‘theological understanding’ and ‘theology’ in the context of multi-faith Religious Education. To demonstrate this, the first main section below begins by analysing two recent examples of opposing views on the place of theology and theological understanding in Religious Education – one view that is strongly ‘affirmative’ about the value of theology in RE, in the sense that it completely *embraces* the idea that theology plays an important role in the study of religions in schools, and another one that is strongly ‘dismissive’ about the value of theology, in the sense that it *denies* the validity of this theory. (It should be noted that, by using the terms ‘affirmative’/‘dismissive’ in these contexts, I am not making a personal value judgement about the general appropriateness of these attitudes, but wish to reflect the fact that those views themselves tend to ascribe either positive or negative roles to theology within learning and teaching in RE.)

## 5.1 Two Opposing Views on the Role of Theological Understanding in Becoming Religiously Literate in RE

The two contrary views on theology considered in this chapter are Jane Chipperton, Gillian Georgiou and Kathryn Wright's discussion paper: Rethinking RE: Religious Literacy, Theological Literacy and Theological Enquiry from 2016 and Alan Brine's two blog posts: Thinking Theologically in RE – Part 1 and Part 2 from the same year. Before examining these two recent perspectives, however, I should explain why these two examples were chosen for this part of the discussion. For this, it is useful to repeat, briefly, how the 'compatibility problem' between theology and multi-faith RE, introduced in chapter 1, has been framed in this thesis and what types of evidence have been analysed so far. As clarified in sections 1.1. and 1.2, whenever reference is made to the problem of disciplinary irreconcilability and the (potential) lack of *theo*-centric RE in the present study, this is not done with the intention of making an empirical claim about the actual state of theology in RE classrooms (e.g. with regard to the amount of theology that is taking place in religiously unaffiliated schools or with regard to the methods being used in such cases), but to point to a *theoretical* problem identifiable in the specialist literature of the subject, which has not been sufficiently explored. This problem, so I have argued, is visible in the views and interpretations of the complicated role and/or contested place of theology in Religious Education, voiced by RE researchers and practitioners in relevant debates, and is best described as the 'problem of *perceived* incompatibility' between certain (confessional) interpretations of the discipline of Theology and particular values of multi-faith RE such as impartiality vis-à-vis certain ontological questions, tolerance of a plurality of perspectives and a general appreciation for religious and cultural diversity.

This argument for a perceived incompatibility between theology and RE was evidenced in three groups of literature sources. The main examples considered in the first group of sources – literature that, in one way or another, opposes *theo*-centric RE in the multi-faith context – were the writings of the British Humanist Association (2007) and Humanists UK (2017) as well as Norman's (2012) reply to Cooling's *Doing God in Education* (2010); Hirst's philosophy of education (1972, 1974d, 1974c) and the works of Smart (1968, 1983). The second group, identified in my literature review, were those types of sources that (either explicitly or implicitly) confirmed a link between the possible marginalisation of theology and its assumed irreconcilability with the values of multi-faith RE. Here, the main examples to cite are Copley, 2005; Cooling, 2010; Cush, 1999; Freathy and Davis, 2019 (which will also be considered in more detail below); Freathy and Parker, 2013; Hull, 1984 and 2004; Jackson 1990 and Pett and Cooling 2018. And the third group, identified in this analysis of relevant literature, were sources that criticise what I have termed a 'general neglect of the transcendent' in current RE practice. This group included examples such as Conroy, 2016; Strhan, 2010 and Teece, 2005, 2010a (of which the latter two will be further examined in chapters 6 and 7) as well as – albeit to a lesser extent, perhaps – the (2010) DCSF report and Hannam 2019. The main conclusion drawn from this analysis was that both sides of the debate about the place of theology in multi-faith RE (theology-embracing versus theology-dismissing sources) tend to take insufficient account of the contextual distinctiveness of the unaffiliated school (in terms of the legal parameters governing them) and the question of what is and is not (legally) possible in this particular school sector. (This problem was further explored in chapter 3 where I included an in-depth analysis of three examples of theology-embracing approaches which claim to be applicable to multiple religions and the extent to which each of them is suitable for the context of multi-faith RE in schools without a religious designation.)

To provide a more detailed examination of this lack of contextual specificity, found on both sides of the academic debate, the present chapter will compare two recent examples of contrary views on theology and the role it might play in the development of students' religious literacy, in particular. This will reveal that these two recent, literacy-centred contributions to the debate, like most of the examples discussed in previous chapters, are based on particular, yet unstated definitions of the nature and purposes of the discipline of Theology (and the relationship it has with Religious Studies within and outside the RE context) which in turn reflects a certain lack of awareness of the contextual distinctiveness of the unaffiliated school in terms of the possible implications this has for the use of theology in this particular school sector. Questioning these (hidden) presuppositions will help to develop (in section 5.2) an alternative view of theology for the specific context of multi-faith RE in religiously unaffiliated schools that serves as a middle position between these two extremes and is thus capable of overcoming the compatibility problem that might otherwise exist between furthering theological understanding(s) and adhering to the values of non-confessional, multi-faith RE such as impartiality and tolerance of a plurality of perspectives (see sections 1.1 to 1.3, 4.2.1 and 4.2.3). As we will see, this solution to the (perceived) compatibility problem is based on the following two conditions: first, theology, in the context of multi-faith RE in schools without a religious affiliation, should mainly be defined in terms of its objects of study, rather than methods, which means all concepts, teachings, beliefs and practices relating to God, gods or ultimate reality found in theistic religions. And second, theological understanding – also identifiable as an understanding of the theological content of different religions then – should be viewed as an important aspect, but not the essence, of the broader aim of developing religious literacy in relation to theistic religions in RE. Drawing on Smart's (1999) multi-dimensional approach (understood here as a useful scheme of study, rather than an all-encompassing conception of religion), the chapter will then end with a specification of what exactly is meant by 'theological content' in this study, distinguishing also between primary and secondary theological objects of study.

These specifications will be the theoretical basis for chapter 6 where this content-based view of theology will then be embedded in a broader hermeneutical framework within which theistic religions are explored through an interpretive lens that assumes the centrality of transcendence in religious belief, which – for theists – arguably manifests itself in an orientation towards the divine in their personal and communal lives. In other words: my interpretive lens for promoting an interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach to theological content in multi-faith RE. (What I mean by 'hermeneutical framework' and 'interpretive lens' in this context will be explained in more detail in chapter 6, sections 6.2.3 and 6.2.4.)

### 5.1.1 One Recent Example of a View That Affirms the Value of Theology in RE: Theological Literacy as the Essence of Religious Literacy

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most affirmative arguments for the usefulness of theology in modern RE come from professionals and researchers in this field who tend to approach the study of religion(s) in schools, to some extent at least, from the insider perspective of their own – usually, Christian – faith tradition. Thus, Cooling (2000, 2010); Büttner (2007); Copley (2005); Chipperton, Georgiou and Wright (Chipperton et al., 2016), all coming in one way or another from a Christian faith perspective, make strong claims for the importance of theology in RE. The example on which I am going to focus is Chipperton, Georgiou and Wright's recent proposition for a theological approach to RE designed for use in Church of England schools as well as schools without a religious affiliation. For them, the importance of theology in RE is grounded in the conviction that gaining a theological understanding of religion(s) is not just a key element in becoming religiously literate, but also provides the depth to religious literacy (Chipperton et al., 2016, 6). The key word, providing some insight into what type of a definition of theological understanding might motivate the promotion of theology here, is 'depth' since it apparently implies, for them, that the discipline of theology can *deepen* students' understanding of religion(s) in a way that other disciplines (i.e. Religious Studies, Philosophy, Ethics, Sociology or Psychology), by their very nature, may not. This view is evident, for example, in their discussion paper about the relationship between religious literacy, theological literacy and theological enquiry from 2016. They define the development of students' theological literacy in RE (here: in Anglican schools, specifically) as 'the study of the concepts that lie *at the heart of religions*, for example God' and wish to help students to develop an understanding of human experience of religious belief by looking at the 'foundations of ideas about (e.g.) God' and the ways in which these ideas relate to one another and are applied in everyday living (Chipperton et al., 2016, 4, my emphasis). As it seems, the main reason why theology is promoted as a useful approach to the study of religion here is that it has the potential to take seriously, presumably more than other approaches, that which is regarded as the essence of religion: belief in God. Consequently, related objects of study (concepts of God) are prioritised in the subject content selection and singled out as providing the depth to religious literacy.

To illustrate this, Chipperton et al. use a tree analogy. For them, religious literacy is analogous to a tree, but not the whole plant – only what is seen at the surface: its trunk, branches and leaves. Theological literacy, on the contrary, is analogous to the roots of the tree, which are under the surface. Even though they conclude that both elements, the tree (religious literacy) and its roots (theological literacy), are 'absolutely essential to the whole' (understanding religion and Christianity in particular, I assume), it is evident that this analogy implies quite a bit more than just that (Chipperton et al., 2016, 6). Looking at it from a purely biological perspective, it is obvious that the tree could never survive without roots. Without them, the tree would no longer be provided with water and nutrients from the soil, which would stop it from growing and deprive it of one of its main sources of life and stability. This suggests that, for Chipperton et al., theological literacy is more than just an important aspect of becoming religiously literate: it is the essence without which meaningful understanding in RE would cease to exist. This raises the question of whether the whole argument presented here is ultimately predicated on the assumption that 'Theology' – as a practice or discipline – is in some way 'deep', namely by its very nature.

This, however, would be a bold assertion to make. First of all, there are many different theologies and ways of 'doing theology' both within and outside the RE context. Why should it be assumed that all of them are equally 'deep' by nature? Moreover, could not the treatment of other subject matter – that is *not* identified as lying 'at the heart of religions' – by other disciplines be also undertaken *in depth*, whilst the theological treatment of foundational ideas about God is carried out in a superficial way? Even if the subject matter considered (theistic belief) is deep in some way, this does not mean that the treatment of it (i.e. through theological methods) will automatically be 'deep' as well. To avoid such misunderstandings, it is evident then, we need to clarify what exactly we mean by 'deep learning' in the context of theology-centred RE. As I will further explain in chapter 6, section 6.2, my view is similar to that of Asherton's who proposes the following three key features of deep learning – being able to: (i) relate previous knowledge to new knowledge; (ii) relate theoretical ideas to everyday experience; and (iii) organise and structure content into a coherent whole (Asherton, 2011). With regard to deep theological understanding, I therefore suggest, among other things, that students learn to make logical connections between various aspects of individual theistic traditions; draw conceptual links between theological content of different theistic religions; identify similarities and contrasts in theistic belief and practice between and within individual faith traditions; and also become aware of (e.g. conceptual, philosophical, etc.) connections between a wide range of lesson contents covered at different stages in Religious Education. It is difficult to see how such an idea of deep theological learning could ever be realised, simply by referring to the nature of the chosen discipline (Theology, in general) or the content studied (e.g. concepts relating to God).

Another problem with this strongly positive/affirmative view on the role and significance of theology within the practice of Religious Education is that it can scarcely be of use in the context of non-confessional, multi-faith RE in schools without a religious affiliation. There are two main reasons why this is the case. First, it is possible to claim that the overall argument that depth of learning in RE can only be afforded by studying God risks being circular as it will mainly be accepted by those who already accept it, due to the fact that they, too, identify God as the deepest referent in religious belief. Yet, by what criteria – one might ask – could we possibly decide what 'lies at the heart of religions' in the context of the study of religion(s) from a non-faith perspective? Why should it be God, let alone God, exclusively? And why (as already questioned above) would studying other aspects of religions in other ways, say a sociological study of rituals and practices or a psychological analysis of human spiritual experience, lead to *less* depth (as opposed to a *different* kind of depth) in learning? Even if the method of furthering theological understanding proposed here (Chipperton's suggestion of a systematic study of all concepts relating to God) can be extended to include consideration of theistic religions other than Christianity, it is questionable whether its underlying theoretical justification – the assumption that God is the deepest referent in religious belief – is acceptable in the context of the study of religions in non-faith-school settings.

Secondly, it could be expected that any theological approach designed, specifically, for the context of Religious Education in Christian faith schools, would be difficult to divorce, both theoretically and practically, from the traditional Christian idea of theology as 'faith seeking understanding'. To recognise why this is problematic for RE in religiously unaffiliated schools, we need to consider briefly the history of the phrase that faith seeks understanding. This expression, with numerous variations, has a rich tradition within Christian theology. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) used the Latin phrase *crede ut intelligas*[55], which can be translated as 'believe so that you may understand', to relate faith and reason within theological practice. For him, this meant that believing in something is a necessary condition for the development of any knowledge about God. Faith, in other words, is an indispensable element in knowledge[56]. At the same time, however, reason also plays an important role in faith. Although reason does not cause faith because (for Augustine) faith always comes first, it has the capacity to support faith wherever it is used in the right God-seeking spirit. Augustine therefore argued that Christians should always use their own reason to grasp the meaning of theological doctrines such as the Trinity or Incarnation, for instance (Fitzgerald, 1999). This principle, in turn, served as a basis for Anselm of Canterbury's (1033-1109) *credo ut intelligam* (I believe so that I may understand) in his Proslogion (discourse) 'An Address on God's Existence', originally entitled *Fides Quaerum Intellectum* (Faith Seeking Understanding) and completed in 1078. Here, the complementary relationship, but also hierarchy, of faith and reason is further defined in the statement: 'I long to understand in some degree your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but rather, I believe in order that I may understand' (Proslogion, Chapter 1). Daniel L. Migliore sees this as a confirmation of the fact that Anselm agrees with Augustine that believers should not engage in intellectual reflection on faith matters 'for the sake of attaining to faith by means of reason' but to 'be gladdened by understanding and meditating on those things that they believe' (Migliore, 2004, 2). Anselm's *fides quaerens intellectum* thus consists of two important realisations – (i) faith seeks understanding and (ii) understanding brings joy by nurturing faith. In the twentieth century, Karl Barth (in his book about Anselm's theology[57]) further developed this position by arguing that theology has this special character of faith seeking understanding due to the fact that it reconsiders, tests and rethinks the faith of the Christian community not from an external philosophical perspective, but always in the light of its enduring foundation, object, and content, which is faith in the divine (Barth, 1960; see also Migliore, 2004). Especially, the latter assertion – that theology tests and rethinks faith not through the lens of any external framework, but from within theistic faith itself – is, of course, highly controversial in the context of non-confessional RE where neither such religious beliefs nor any other should ever be presupposed on the part of the students.

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[55] This phrase is found in Augustine's *Sermon 43.7.9*.

[56] For similar interpretations of Augustine, see for example Ronald H. Nash (1973, 1999); Allan D. Fitzgerald (1999); Allister E. McGrath (1998) and Daniel L. Migliore (2004)

This is why it is problematic that certain aspects of this way of thinking about the role of theology in a person's religious education are reflected in Chipperton, Georgiou and Wright's paper. Drawing on Etienne Gilson's comparison of scholastic theology with a 'cathedral of the mind', they argue, theological literacy is as important to the world of ideas as cathedrals are to the world of architecture (Chipperton et al., 2016, 4). I interpret this to mean that faith in the divine is not just an important focus among others, but also the absolute starting point in the study of religion from which the whole world of religious ideas or knowledge can be accessed, informed and further developed. But apparently, this is not all: by learning how to think theologically and employing the methods of theological enquiry – Chipperton et al. go on to explain – students will not just start to 'dig deeper' into the fundamental (theological) concepts upon which religions are based, theological literacy also enables them to understand religion as a 'synthesis of ideas capable of undergirding every aspect of life'[58]. This all-encompassing quality of the presence of God in the world, it seems, can even be experienced in the act of thinking theologically itself. What students do when they engage in theological enquiry, according to Chipperton et al., is a form of wrestling with the deeper meaning and impact of key theological concepts, which is ultimately comparable with the experience of 'wrestling with God' himself as found for example in the story of Jacob in Genesis 32: 22-32 (Chipperton et al., 2016, 7). Therefore, this theological approach to RE could be viewed as a reflection of significant aspects involved in the traditional Christian idea of theology as faith seeking understanding. As the cathedral example reveals, it puts faith before reason by considering belief in the divine as the origin of knowledge and starting point of all knowledge-seeking in RE. And, by seeing theological enquiry as analogous to wrestling with God, it also meets Barth's requirement that theology should always examine faith in the light of theistic belief, rather than study theological subject matter from a purely external (e.g. philosophical or ethical) perspective.

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[57] *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of his Theological Scheme* (Barth, 1960)

[58] Quotation taken from Alister E. McGrath: *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (McGrath, 2007, 29)

At least two problems arise from an association of theology with faith seeking understanding in the context of multi-faith RE in schools without a religious affiliation. First, imposing a Christian approach to theology upon other religious traditions, including non-Abrahamic ones, could clearly be regarded as a Western academic practice that ignores other religions' traditions of theological study and their interpretations of what theology is and seeks to achieve. Even if the methods used to study theological concepts in Christianity (in Chipperton et al.'s case: a combination of Biblical Studies; Systematic Theology; Philosophical and Historical Theology; etc.; see p. 7) could be adapted to other religions, it is difficult to see how this Christian-centred practice would meet the requirements of academic impartiality and acknowledgement of a plurality of perspectives in the study of religions today (see my discussion of Pett, 2018b in chapter 4, section 4.1.3). Second, if theology in Religious Education really is a form of knowledge-seeking motivated by faith, it could easily be argued that the study of religion must be predicated on faith – and theistic belief, specifically – because without it, students would have no valid means of seeking (theological) understanding in the first place. This would, of course, be unacceptable in non-faith-school settings, as proponents of such a theological approach might then be accused of presupposing theistic belief on the part of the students, even if they did so unintentionally and without noticing it, perhaps. In the case considered above, for example, it is obvious that Chipperton et al. are aware of this problem when they state that, even though 'thinking theologically goes beyond the confines of RE', it is 'possible to gain theological literacy *without having to confess the faith that is being studied*', whether it is in Anglican or non-denominational, state-maintained schools (Chipperton et al., 2016, 6, emphasis in the text). Given the lack of further explanations at this point in the argument, it is unclear, however, how the apparent contradiction between this new statement and some of the central claims that went before would ultimately be resolved. It is hard to see, for example, how students of RE would be free to reject or stay neutral with respect to theistic belief if, at the same time, the skill they are meant to develop (thinking theologically) is understood as a form of *wrestling with God* as opposed to *wrestling with the idea of God*, and if the study of theological concepts itself is justified by the assumption that only theology may provide depth to learning in RE because belief in God is what 'lies at the heart of religions'. We may therefore conclude that the theoretical justification for developing theological understanding in RE, underlying such Christian denominational approaches, can hardly be maintained as an appropriate starting point for the development of theological understanding(s) in schools without a religious affiliation.

### 5.1.2 One Recent Example of a View That Dismisses the Value of Theology in RE: Theology as Inappropriate for Non-Confessional Settings

Given the above considerations, it is necessary to ask whether negative attitudes to the usefulness of theology in Religious Education (especially, when these are put forward with vehemence, yet without much explanation as to which type of understanding of theology they actually oppose) could just be reactions against such Christian denominational approaches and their implicit prioritisation of theological subject matter as the best guarantee for deep learning. This might explain why some practitioners and researchers in the field of Religious Education see no significant value in promoting theological understanding as a means to deepen learning in multi-faith RE at all and would rather exclude it from the list of goals to be achieved in RE classrooms (see Brine, 2016a, 2016b; Dinham & Shaw; 2015; Hirst 1972, 1974d, 1974c; Norman 2012; Smart 1968, 1983). As explained above, I will focus on Alan Brine as a recent example of a view coming from this end of the spectrum because, in his blog posts (2016a, 2016b), Brine engages in the important discussion about the relationship between theology and religious literacy, which is a topic that is central to my thesis. He claims that it is dangerous to elevate 'theological enquiry as *the way* into deepening learning in RE' as this would indirectly promote a particular, orthodox understanding of Christianity that 'undermines a core ideal of religious literacy, i.e. the impartial study of religion and belief' (Brine, 2016b, emphasis in the text). Without explaining how a view of Religious Education that excludes theology from the list of suitable approaches to be used in RE could possibly be regarded as 'impartial', he concludes in sharp contrast to Chipperton, Georgiou and Wright (2016):

> 'A diversity of disciplines including History, Philosophy, Sociology, Phenomenology, etc. can each bring a depth (the roots) to the study of religion and belief but *I have serious doubts whether theology is one of those disciplines*.' (Brine, 2016b, emphasis and insertion in the text).

As we can see, this position uses a root analogy very different from the tree/root image considered above: a wide range of disciplines *except theology* can be the root of the study of religion(s) and are therefore essential to the task of furthering religious literacy/understanding in RE. Theology, by contrast, is not essential to this endeavour.

As indicated above, however, despite the vehemence of this position, it is difficult to find any clear definition of what exactly it is that Brine opposes here. The reason he gives for rejecting theology as a potentially valuable approach to the study of religions in schools is that he sees it as an academic discipline aimed at reflecting on, and thinking about one's faith, which has its rightful place only within the community of faith, but not in the context of Religious Studies at (primary and secondary) school level (Brine, 2016b). This clearly shows that Brine interprets theology as an expression of faith seeking understanding. His logic seems to be as follows: the only justification for doing theology is that, through this practice, faith may seek understanding, which nurtures faith and strengthens the religious community engaging in it. Theology thus has a place in Religious Education only if the term is understood as instruction in the principles of a particular religion from the given faith's perspective, for example in a Christian church context. However, without faith, e.g. in RE lessons in schools without a religious affiliation where faith cannot be presupposed on the part of the students, theology is not a valid means of seeking understanding because religions should be studied academically/impartially, and methodological choices must never reflect religious interests, be it those of the school or individual teachers.

This explains why – according to Brine – theology cannot play an important role in Religious Education, the school subject. As 'impartial students of religion', so Brine argues, students could only observe the process of doing theology from the outside, for example by watching contemporary theologians practice their subject, and then ask questions about how the theological doctrines they hear about came into existence or how theologians have argued over them or reinterpreted their meanings in different historical and cultural contexts (Brine, 2016b). Yet, from Brine's perspective, there is, and definitely should be, no room for students to *do*, as opposed to learn about, theology themselves; and even learning about theological concepts and doctrines, academically, is problematic as it runs the risk of misidentifying what Smart calls the 'doctrinal dimension of religion' as the most important aspect of religious belief (Smart, 1999). This, Brine assumes, contradicts the lived experience of most believers who rarely engage in detailed analyses of theological concepts and doctrines in their everyday lives:

> 'We need to remember that for many (most?) people, including many who would self-identify as Christians, theological concepts and processes probably play little or no part in their lives.' (Brine, 2016b)

This argument, however, is not convincing. In their recent article, 'Theology in Multi-Faith Religious Education: A Taboo to Be Broken?' (2019), Freathy and Davis evaluate this dismissive view about the role of theology and the significance of learning about and understanding theological concepts and doctrines as follows. Although it may be true that not all self-identifying Christians actively engage in systematic academic theology, 'there remain other ways in which they do approach, respond to, and engage with notions of the ultimate, transcendent, and/or "other"' (Freathy & Davis, 2019, 455). These ways (e.g. participation in community and rituals of worship such as liturgical readings, hymn singing, the Eucharist, etc.,), they explain, whilst being less 'academic' in nature, can still be 'construed as theological, particularly if they lead to, or become the object of, reflection and contemplation' (Freathy & Davis, 2019, 455). Given that Brine ignores these subtleties, one might surmise that what really motivates his dismissal of theology as a legitimate approach to RE is not the desire of finding ways to engage, deeply, with theistic religions and their theological/doctrinal dimensions, but the conviction that theological approaches to the study of religions are necessarily predicated on faith, and faith in God specifically, and should therefore not be used in religiously unaffiliated schools.

If we put aside for a moment the possible objection that there are many ways of 'doing' theology in multi-faith RE that do not necessarily presuppose any faith perspective on the part of the student[59] (one development of such a position will be proposed in this study), we may draw two important, interrelated conclusions from the above juxtaposition of views that are either extremely affirmative or dismissive about the value of theology in Religious Education. First, final evaluations of the significance of students' theological understanding in RE seem to be linked to underlying assumptions about the ultimate relationship between theological and religious literacy. Thus, we have seen that Christian denominational accounts of the positive role of theology in RE are sometimes based on the assumption that understanding theological subject matter (e.g. concepts and doctrines relating to God) leads students to the essence of religion, thereby providing the depth to their overall understanding of religion. Dismissive positions, by contrast, seem to rest on the premise that nothing important is to be gained from studying the theological dimensions of religions in Religious Education because theology is an area of expertise relevant only to religiously motivated scholars within a specific faith community who interpret the discipline as an expression of faith seeking understanding. Using theological methods in multi-faith Religious Education is then either inappropriate in secular educational settings (since it requires students to have or make a faith commitment to be able to gain understanding in the first place) or impossible (if theological understanding, interpreted in this confessional way, is sought without faith). From such a viewpoint, there are much more adequate approaches to the study of religions in schools, all of which (either individually or in combination with others) provide opportunities for deep learning in Religious Education. This, in turn, leads us to the second conclusion: to ensure that theological approaches to the study of religions can be evaluated as suitable or unsuitable for the context of multi-faith RE in religiously unaffiliated schools, those who promote them need to make explicit the overall scope of their position by defining the relationship and, if applicable, hierarchy between their approach and other methods and disciplines currently used in RE.

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[59] See, for example: Trevor Cooling's Stapleford Project (Cooling, 2000, 2008); John Hull's thematic teaching (Hull, 1975c, 1975d); and Rob Freathy's and Esther Reed's narrative theological approach to RE (Freathy et al., 2014; Reed et al., 2013). (Compare chapter 3.)

## 5.2 Furthering Theological Understanding(s) in Religious Education: A Middle Way Between the Extremes

To provide the transparency I demand from other theology-centred approaches (see section 5.1.2) and to demonstrate that the one I promote in this study is in fact compatible with the values of non-confessional, multi-faith RE, I will explain, as a next step, my own view of theological understanding and its role in Religious Education. As we have seen, one of the strongest objections coming from opponents of the idea of promoting any type of theological understanding in RE in religiously unaffiliated schools is that theology is a faith-internal practice seeking understanding of all things relating to God mainly for the purpose of nurturing faith in the divine in the given theistic tradition – in other words, a clearly illegitimate approach to the study of religions in such secular educational settings. To refute this criticism, I will argue that this way of thinking is short-sighted as it ignores the reality of how Theology as a discipline (e.g. at university level) is already being taught and studied in England today, namely as a subject that is neither concerned with the lecturers' nor with the students' own motivations and religious backgrounds, but with the subject knowledge content of Theology and the wide range of methodological approaches to studying that content adopted in the discipline.

### 5.2.1 Theology and the Question of Required Faith Commitment

The undergraduate programme 'BA in Theology and Religion' offered by the University of Exeter provides a useful example of such a *non*-faith-requiring view of theology. As the degree description on the university's website reveals, this Theology programme aims to give students 'an excellent grounding in all the subjects essential to a good understanding of the discipline, from biblical studies and church history to modern theology, philosophy and ethics' (University of Exeter: BA Theology and Religion). And regarding the issue of religious affiliation, the subject brochure of 2017 states:

> 'Our broad and varied curriculum is taught by enthusiastic staff. You do not need to be religious to find the issues our Theology and Religion programmes raise (or the ways in which we tackle them) compelling. Our friendly department is made up of students and staff with diverse opinions and ideas about religion and faith, atheism and secularism. All you need is the desire to study with enthusiasm and an open mind.' (Theology and Religion: Undergraduate Subject Brochure, University of Exeter, 2017)

Similar attitudes to theological study and its requirements, also confirming that Theology as an academic practice is not predicated on faith, can be found in the online degree presentations of other universities including Oxford and Cambridge[60]. Even degree specifications that are methodologically more focused on theological concepts and doctrines than on practical/ethical considerations, for instance, such as 'Systematic Theology', adhere to the rule that a theological study of religion(s) does not presuppose faith and/or faith in the divine in particular. Here, one might point to the distance-learning MA programme currently provided by Nottingham University. In an online interview entitled 'Why Study Systematic Theology At The University of Nottingham', Karen Kilby, explains, for example, that this subject can be studied both from a Christian insider perspective, in which case students learn to think theologically within the context of their own faith, and from a non-religious viewpoint, in which case students look at the intellectual structure of the Christian faith (University of Nottingham YouTube clip: Systematic Theology, 2011). Hence, it becomes clear that the assumption: 'theology means faith seeking understanding and is therefore inadequate for non-faith academic settings' is contradicted by current academic practice at undergraduate and postgraduate level, which, in turn, raises the question why something that seems to work well at university level should not be possible at earlier educational stages.

To show that theology does not necessarily require faith commitment, Freathy and Davis (2019) distinguish between the following two broad meanings of the term: first, theology can refer to a 'theistic worldview and within that the (in-)formal attempts of believers in God to organise, communicate, contemplate, and/or justify their ideas' – an interpretation of theology that sometimes finds specification in the descriptive adjectives 'popular' or 'lay'. Or second, Theology (with a capital T) can refer to an 'academic discipline or field within higher education'. It is in this second context that the question arises of whether Theology requires faith commitment. This, they argue, is usually the case, for example, in the (vocational) setting of a theological college or (church) seminary where 'Theology may require the prerequisite of faith'. However, in secular institutional settings such as HE courses in Theology, it is very uncommon to expect staff or students to hold theistic beliefs despite the fact that such beliefs are the focus of study. Furthermore, in this second academic sense, it is also important to differentiate between various types of Theology courses offered at HE institutions. Thus, Theology can be (i) 'a single, well-defined discipline primarily orientated around "Systematic Theology"', which they define as a discipline dealing with a 'core body of knowledge and the traditions involved in engaging with and applying it', such as doctrines and liturgy. Or (ii), Theology can also be 'a multi- or interdisciplinary field of inquiry, encompassing theories and concepts, interpretations and perspectives, and/or methodologies and methods' shared with other (i.e. Humanities and Social Science) disciplines. Moreover, there are denominational theologies (Protestant, Roman Catholic, etc.); specific theological traditions within one faith tradition – in the case of Christianity: neo-orthodox, (post-)liberal, feminist, etc.; and theologies of non-Christian religions (Judaism, Islam, Sikhism, etc.). The verb 'theologise' can then be interpreted to mean either to 'do', to 'enact' or to 'implement' any of the types of theology outlined above. What this variety of definitions therefore reveals, Freathy and Davis explain, is that theology sometimes refers to the *content(s)*, and at other times, to the *method(s)* of theological thought, inquiry and communication – or to a combination of both (Freathy & Davis, 2019, 449-450). Given the fact that there are different forms of theology many of which do not require any faith commitment on the part of the student, they thus conclude with regard to the place of theology in multi-faith RE that there is no reason to exclude theology from the list of adequate approaches to be used in schools without a religious affiliation.

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[60] The degree website Theology, Religion and Philosophy of the University of Cambridge states, for example:

> 'Whether your focus is an individual search for meaning, or fundamental issues of war and peace, freedom and bondage, good and evil, this degree is about the relentless pursuit of a deeper, truer understanding. You do not have to be religious to study for this degree: our undergraduates belong to all religions and none. What you do need is a passion for the importance of religion in the world and by studying it you have the opportunity to develop your thinking in this area and express your views.' (University of Cambridge, 2017)

However, one reason why some people might object to the prospect of doing and/or studying theology from a non-faith perspective is that it could be more difficult for students without a theistic belief than it is for Christian students, for instance, to engage in the type of 'theologising' that one might see in a modern Systematic Theology module. It could be argued, specifically: should they be unable or unwilling to suspend their disbelief (which should be a perfectly legitimate attitude in theology in secular educational settings), they would first need to accept quite a number of abstract conditional clauses to be in the required intellectual position from which in-depth theological questions can even be asked. One could respond to this argument by claiming that students who do not have a faith commitment do not need to be the source of theological questions themselves as long as they are capable of identifying and understanding the content on which they focus as questions and answers of others, but this still invites the criticism that their learning experience is somewhat limited, compared with that of Christian students. Theologising about potential attributes of God such as omnibenevolence, omnipotence, omniscience could be named as a good example here. Affiliates of a theistic religion like Christianity might often make assumptions about the nature of the divine automatically, thus being 'fast-tracked', so to speak, to the required intellectual position, which puts them in a place different from that of non-Christian students.

Yet, again it is difficult to evaluate which group, if any, is disadvantaged here. It could be replied, for instance, that even if it were true that lack of theistic belief increases the level of intellectual challenge for Theology students, this need not necessarily be considered a bad thing and should certainly not serve as a justification for banning theology from non-faith educational settings altogether. First, one could turn the argument around by claiming that, especially at secondary-school level, the same logic sometimes applies to religious students who are asked to engage in scientific theories that contradict their beliefs – say Creationists who study Darwin's theory of evolution in Biology – but it is much less likely that the increased level of difficulty would be viewed in a negative light by educators in this case. Furthermore, it is arguable that, due to their different backgrounds, religious and non-religious students can mutually enrich one another's thought processes by providing the other side with important argumentative elements it might not have considered on its own. It could even be questioned whether students without a theistic belief are really disadvantaged in this exchange of ideas as their lack of belief might also be a source of intellectual power to rely on when it comes to identifying and questioning fundamental premises about the nature of God that are essential to the discussion. Looking at the problem of evil from this viewpoint, for example, it might just as well be the Christian students who face the greater intellectual challenge as they might sometimes accept certain premises about God's nature (i.e. omnipotence, omnibenevolence) at an emotional/experiential level of which they are unaware and thus cannot access for the purpose of argumentation. Calling one or the other group 'disadvantaged', I would therefore conclude, is rather unhelpful. For this reason, the claim that only students who believe in God can engage deeply with the content of Theology modules, whether at university or in theology-centred RE lessons, should be questioned.

If we accept this argument for the possibility of promoting versions of theology in Religious Education that are free from faith commitment, we might realise that Brine's negative evaluation of the place of theology in RE (in schools without a religious affiliation) – see section 5.1.2 above – does not apply to this interpretation of the term as it implicitly draws on a traditional, confessional view of the discipline. In fact, it can be argued – as I have done in chapter 4 – that current disagreement on the place of theology in Religious

Education is a reflection of the complicated disciplinary relationship of Religious Studies and Theology, of which the former has traditionally been portrayed as approaching the study of religions from the appropriate 'objective' perspective of the outsider, and the latter has been depicted as using a confessional and hence, (partial) insider's approach to the study of Christianity inadequate for multi-faith RE. I therefore concluded that simple binary oppositions – whether used in connection with people's supposed insider/outsider perspectives on religious matters or in connection with disciplinary relationships (i.e. between Theology and Religious Studies) – should generally be avoided in the discourse practices of Religious Education. David Ford (Ford, 2013; Ford & Muers, 2005) describes the relationship between the two disciplines (here at HE level) as follows. There are three approaches to Christian Theology of which only the first one is distinct and perhaps, incompatible with Religious Studies in secular educational settings: first – and this is identical with Freathy and Davis's first description of academic Theology – Theology can be practiced in institutions identified with a particular church or denomination, e.g. in a church seminary. Second, Theology can be integrated or taught alongside RS in college or university, in which case several religions are studied through various disciplines. In this context, Theology is viewed as 'part of the history and phenomenology of life in the different religions', and there is little focus on questions of absolute truth. And finally, Theology and Religious Studies are sometimes combined, collaborating well and in mutual respect for each other. According to Ford, best practice is found in universities where the disciplines of Theology and Religious Studies 'work together', in this third sense, and a simple split between them is rejected as a principle (Ford, 2013, 14-15; compare Cush, 1999). Endorsing such a reconciliatory/collaborative view as well, I aim to develop a framework for furthering theological understanding(s) in RE that is based on a combined/inter-disciplinary approach to Religious Studies and Theology. How I think this is possible and most effective – with regard to the task of overcoming potential problems of compatibility between the two disciplines in this specific educational context – will be explained below.

### 5.2.2 Theological Understanding as Understanding of Theological Content: An Alternative View of Theology in Multi-Faith RE

This argument for the necessity of constructive collaboration between Religious Studies and Theology, one could claim, is even more important in the context of non-confessional, multi-faith RE than it is in HE settings since state-maintained schools do not have the possibility to provide separate pathways for the two disciplines, and modularising a subject of such little lesson time, according to disciplines, is neither realistic nor recommendable as it would reinforce, rather than dissolve the disciplinary split that has arguably led to a regrettable lack of dialogue between the two fields of study in multi-faith RE since the 1970s (see chapter 1, section 1.2). What is feasible instead (also with a view to overcoming the perceived compatibility problem that exists between certain confessional interpretations of theology and the values of non-confessional multi-faith RE) is to promote a vision of theology which does not require faith commitment and integrates well with existing RS methods and methodologies. Thus, drawing on my conclusions from section 5.1.1, I would argue that an important condition theology must fulfil to have a legitimate place in RE in non-faith school settings is that it sees itself not as the only lens through which to approach the study of religion(s) in schools, but as an integral part of a broader, multi- (and/or inter-)disciplinary, multi-methodological approach. Although some RE researchers disagree, encouraging us to commit ourselves to one pedagogical lens at the expense of others (see, for example, Lundie's recent attack on the 'hybrid curriculum model', 2018), my discussion of Reed and Freathy's Narrative Theology (chapter 3) and Hannam's existential model (chapter 4) has shown that approaches operating with a single methodological/theoretical lens risk overemphasising one facet of what it means to be religious, whilst potentially missing out on equally important other aspects.

A similar viewpoint regarding the place of theology in multi-faith RE has recently been adopted by Freathy and Davis (2019). For them, various forms of theology and theological inquiry, defined as method(s) and/or content(s), are 'fit for purpose', that is compatible with the values of non-confessional, multi-faith RE, if they are used as part of a multi-methodological, (self-)critical, dialogic and inquiry-led approach that does not require faith commitment on the part of the students, acknowledges the necessary plurality of perspectives and personal insider/outsider positionalities in RE and enables students to develop the high-level skill of empathy (Freathy & Davis, 2019, 458-463). The significance of these pedagogical principles (which they see as much more essential to the question of legitimacy than the specific forms theology may take) becomes most evident if we consider potentially controversial applications of theology. Thus, even 'uncritical, monologic and dogmatic theologies', Freathy and Davis claim, can be 'encountered and investigated legitimately' in multi-faith RE, which includes theologies predicated on acceptance of theistic belief, so long as this is done through the 'critical, dialogic and inquiry-led learning processes' promoted by them (Freathy & Davis, 2019, 460). However, as one might interpret on the basis of the following specifications made by them, this is not the same as saying that it may also be appropriate to *use* such forms of confessional (insiders') theology as a methodological lens in schools without a religious affiliation. Students may 'encounter' and 'investigate' theologies requiring faith commitment (see Freathy & Davis, 2019, 460) – in other words, they may *learn about* them in RE – but these theologies are merely objects of study then, not methods to employ by the students themselves because this would require them to adopt, temporarily at least, a faith perspective:

> 'Theology predicated on acceptance of a theistic worldview and referring to the (in)formal attempts of believers in God to organise, communicate, contemplate and/or justify their ideas might be studied legitimately as "content" through *empathetic* and *critical* procedures.' (Freathy & Davis, 2019, 460, emphases in the text)

Although there might even be a case to allow for 'theological inquiry of the same "confessional" ilk' to take place and 'even be *undertaken*' by all students, regardless of their personal positionalities', in which case (I interpret) such confessional theology would become *method*, not content in RE, Freathy and Davis seem to confirm that this would be rather difficult to achieve in practice and needs much caution (2019, 460, my emphasis). Thus, they stress, for example, that such a practice could be promoted 'at least *in theory*', that is 'with many caveats concerning practical implementation' such as assuring somehow that critical distance is never lost (2019, 460, my emphasis). Here, the main area of focus for evaluating the legitimacy of confessional theologies, when used as methods in RE, is whether or not they fulfil the criterion of 'being one of many different interpretive lenses' through which students would be asked to investigate – 'temporarily and experimentally' – subject matter within the broader critical, dialogic, inquiry-led multi-methodological approach (Freathy & Davis, 2019, 460).

Yet, as indicated above, from my perspective, even such a 'timed experiment' would be controversial, if not impossible, as it demands from students who do not have a theistic faith to adopt a temporary faith perspective, which means they would be required to actively believe in God for the given period of time – as opposed to just '*bracket*' their disbelief and accept that other people might see the world through the lens of God and, by the power of empathy, try to step into their shoes, for methodological purposes. It could possibly be replied to my objection that students, rather than actually believing, would only have to *imagine* that they believed in God (and, perhaps, think about the consequences this would have for their thoughts and deeds) to be able to engage in this type of confessional theology. However, this view of confessionalism, based on 'imagined faith', contradicts my definition of the types of confessional theology that are particularly problematic in the context of multi-faith RE, namely those of the faith-seeking-understanding category. This is because, without actual belief, a confessional approach of this category, would arguably become meaningless since its main aim – drawing nearer to God through theological contemplation – cannot be pursued whilst at the same time keeping a critical distance from the very God-centred methods used for this purpose as well as the main object of study: God. Again, a possible response to this might be that such an argument only holds true if one defines such confessional theological approaches by their aims, rather than methods and content, but that (I would suggest) is more than justifiable given the obviously goal-orientated linguistic construction of the phrase that faith *seeks* understanding (in the example of confessional theology considered here). For students to truly engage in the experiment of doing theology of this sort, it is arguable then, they would also have to believe, for the duration of the experiment at least, in God – the main focus of this particular quest for understanding. This is necessary because, otherwise, it is evident, they would be engaged in a very different kind of 'confessional' theology in RE from the one believing students would experience. Instead of 'faith seeking understanding of God', it would be '*imagined* faith *imagining* the search for understanding of (a possibly *imagined*) God', and I have serious doubts that this would still count as 'confessional' in any sense of the word. I therefore conclude: although it is certainly true that confessional types of theology can be legitimate content for study in RE in schools without a religious affiliation (Brine, for example, does not deny this either, see 2016b), the question of whether they should – or even *can* – also be used as methods is much more debatable, even if one tried to embed them in an otherwise appropriate interdisciplinary, multi-methodological approach. From my perspective, the argument proposed in the present study that certain confessional types of theology should probably not be used (as methods), as opposed to studied (as content), in religiously unaffiliated schools is therefore still valid.

Here follows another reason why I think such a restriction is necessary in the context of non-confessional, multi-faith RE. Given that there seems to be only little room for students to engage with theology in non-confessional RE as it stands (see section 1.2), it is difficult to see how the *meta-level practice of learning about, investigating and applying RE methodologies*, which is just beginning to form in RE practice through projects such as the RE-searchers' approach promoted by Freathy et al. (Freathy et al., 2015; R. Freathy & G. Freathy, 2013b; see also: chapter 3, section 3.5), could be extended to include applications of controversial types of theology, without raising further concerns about the legitimacy of using theology in RE at all. This has to do with the awkward position such theologies would have vis-à-vis other selected methodologies in the RE-searchers' approach. Thus, it is arguable that the main researcher roles students are currently encouraged to adopt in this multi-methodological model of RE – phenomenologist (see fictional character: Ask-It-All Ava); critical realist (Debate-It-All Derek); experience-based researcher (Have-A-Go Hugo) and narrative theologian/philosopher (See-The-Story Suzie) – are all presented, implicitly at least, not just as appropriate objects of study, *but also as legitimate methods to use*, e.g. for certain purposes and/or in certain circumstances, in multi-faith Religious Education. However, if one accepts my argument that confessional types of theology (such as the example given above) should not be used as methods *at all* (as opposed to studied as content) in religiously non-affiliated schools, this would make them categorically different from the approaches which have so far been included and represented as RE-searchers in this multi-methodological pedagogy. Here is another example: including a confessional version of theology such as Barth's neo-orthodox interpretation of faith seeking understanding as a method to use in the RE-searchers' approach means creating an additional fictional character that would represent this theology and induct students in the associated methods and research practices of this systematic theology. Yet, in comparison, to the other (already existing) RE-searchers, this one fictional scholar would then stand for an approach that – again, provided that my argument is valid – is inappropriate to use in RE in religiously unaffiliated schools as it cannot be reconciled with the non-confessional, multi-faith nature of the subject (here, most notably: not requiring faith on the part of the students). To explain: currently, the self-critical element of the RE-searchers' approach, as I understand it, seems to lie mainly in the possibility of allowing students to develop an awareness of potential (e.g. situational) shortcomings of individual methodological approaches, especially when used exclusively, (e.g. overly descriptive/objectivist interpretations of phenomenology or relativist tendencies in experience-based learning). Yet, this does not go as far as to require students – or teachers for that matter – to also assess the selection of research methodologies at their disposal for potential *general* incompatibilities with the values of non-confessional forms of RE. If we use the lens of the fictional character, Have-A-Go Hugo, as an example, we will see that, in the case of experienced-based learning, students would only have to realise in which circumstances 'having a go' is an appropriate method to use in the study of religions and in which it is not (e.g. learning about Buddhist meditation: yes; learning about the practice of exorcism in Roman Catholicism: no – to use a drastic example). But they would never have to question the potential usefulness, let alone *usability*, of this approach at their disposal in complete and general terms.

The methodologies proposed in the RE-searchers model including the one chosen as a possible theological approach (Narrative Theology), one might therefore conclude, are all promoted both as potential adequate content of and methods for Religious Education, even if there are certain limitations for students to explore in each case. This, however, would not apply to confessional types of theology (requiring faith commitment). Including them in the list of approaches for students to use as part of their critical, dialogic, inquiry-led learning would make them categorically different from the approaches mentioned above in that it would have to be specified, at some point in the learning process, that and why these approaches are always illegitimate if used, even temporarily, as methods in non-confessional RE. Given the complicated position theology already has in Religious Education, it might therefore be better to concentrate on the task of suggesting theological approaches as part of a broader multi-methodological, interdisciplinary approach that can be considered adequate for the context of non-confessional, multi-faith RE, whether used as content to study or methods to employ in the classroom. Reed and Freathy's Narrative Theology (Freathy et al., 2014; Reed et al., 2013) could be named as one such example, especially – as I have argued in chapter 3 – if it is used as part of the RE-searchers' approach and clearly conceptualised in such a way that it includes consideration of all theistic religions studied in RE. So far, however, it has only been applied to Christian Theology, and Bible Studies in particular, and could hence be criticised for being too Christian-centred, at least in its current development, to be suitable for the context of multi-faith Religious Education. As argued in chapters 1 and 3, this interreligious aspect is an important one to consider as it might help to counter arguments for the exclusion of theology in multi-faith Religious Education which are made on the grounds of such incompatibility claims.

What this discussion therefore reveals is that we need to distinguish, carefully, between, the realisation that *theology can be a method to use or content to be studied in RE* (e.g. from other, non-theological academic perspectives), on the one hand, and the statement *that theology can itself be defined in terms of its content and/or methods*, on the other hand. Concentrating on the former aspect, I would summarise, theology (in all its variations and irrespective of confessional or non-confessional viewpoints inherent in it) can be content for investigation in RE, provided that this content is studied through the methods of an adequate, (self-)critical, e.g.

interdisciplinary, multi-methodological approach. To be used as a method, however (even if it is part of such an adequate broader approach), theology should be compatible with the values and principles of non-confessional, multi-faith RE (i.e. being impartial vis-à-vis certain ontological questions; tolerating a plurality of perspectives; requiring no faith commitment, etc.) and therefore, ideally, be applicable to all monotheistic and polytheistic religions studied in RE. Concentrating on the second aspect, I would argue, one way of assuring that theology meets these requirements and can therefore be used, without compatibility problems, in schools without a religious affiliation, is to *define it mainly in terms of its objects of study* – in short: the theological content studied in RE. In other words, instead of suggesting the study of confessional and perhaps, controversial Christian theologies as RE curriculum content (which Freathy and Davis name as one possibility within a critical, dialogic and inquiry-led approach) or promoting the use of theologies as RE methods that do not require faith commitment, but may be too Christian-centred, either in their original orientation (e.g. the Stapleford Project; the Biblos Project; Understanding Christianity) or current application (e.g. Narrative Theology), I therefore suggest the following content-based view of theology that includes all theistic religions in its consideration. This type of theology defines itself primarily by its objects of study, but not exclusively as we will see in the next chapter, that is the specific theological contents of all mono- and polytheistic religions encountered in RE (including key concepts, teachings and practices relating to belief in the divine) and can thus be used in relation to all theistic religions without compatibility problems with the values of non-confessional, multi-faith RE.

Another advantage of this content-centred view of theology is that it provides a middle way between the extremes discussed above: very affirmative attitudes about the value of theology in Religious Education coming from Christian 'insiders' of theistic belief (e.g. Chipperton et al.) versus very dismissive ones coming from 'outsiders' of religious belief (e.g. Brine). Drawing on my reflections on these two positions as well as Freathy and Davis's recent contributions to the debate, I conclude that the following **three principles** should always be applied to achieve such a middle position. (The remaining sections of this chapter will then further explain my reasons for the selection of these principles.)

(i) First, the practice of furthering theological understanding(s) in multi-faith RE in schools without a religious affiliation should be construed as an academic study of key theological concepts and teachings of different theistic religions that does not presuppose faith in the divine on the part of the students – in other words: a non-confessional practice that defines theology mainly by its objects of study and is applicable to all theistic religions.

(ii) Second, the aim of developing students' theological understanding(s) in this way – defined as understanding(s) of theological content of different theistic religions – should be viewed as an important aspect of becoming religiously literate in relation to theistic religions, but not as the essence of religious literacy/understanding as such.

(iii) And third, the practice of exploring theological content of theistic religions should not be thought of as the only, let alone best, way into deepening learning in RE, but rather as an important part of a broader multi-methodological, interdisciplinary approach to the study of religions that looks at the defining feature of theistic religions: belief in God/the divine.

Several steps are needed to present and explain this RE-specific conceptualisation of (interreligious) theology, defined in terms of its objects of study – in short: the theological content of different theistic religions – in more detail here. First, it is important to identify the underlying conception of religion and the study of religion(s) in which this particular aspect of my approach to theology (to be further developed in chapter 6) is rooted. Section 5.2.3 below will therefore propose a multi-dimensional view of religion, based on Smart's phenomenological approach to RS (Smart, 1999) and clarify how my study of theological content in RE fits into this way of thinking about both the phenomenon of religion as well as individual religious traditions. With these clarifications in mind, I will then – in section 5.2.4 – turn to the question of the relationship between my content-based view of theological understanding and religious literacy. Thus, I will explain, on the basis of a number of examples, revealing the unique interconnectedness of different dimensional manifestations of religious phenomena, that the study of theological content is always, automatically, intimately related to other, e.g. ethical, social, ritual, etc. considerations in the study of (theistic) religion(s) and vice versa, which makes it rather non-sensical to identify a single aspect of religious belief and practice (including belief in God) as the 'heart of religion' as such. And finally, section 5.2.5 will then end with a specification of what I mean by 'theological content' in the context of multi-faith RE, based on a particular view and differentiation of 'primary' and 'secondary' theological objects of study that takes into account exactly this view of the interrelatedness of the different dimensions of religion(s).

### 5.2.3 The Theological as a Dimension of Religion: Using Smart's Multi-Dimensional Approach as a Scheme of Study in RE

Explaining the conception(s) of religion on which my interreligious, theologically orientated approach to multi-faith RE is based is a complex matter. First of all, it is important to understand that, although the content-centred view of theology developed in the present chapter draws on a particular idea of religion and the study of religions, specifically (Smart's phenomenology), this view of theology itself (as I will show in chapter 6) can and should be embedded in a broader hermeneutical framework in which theistic religions are explored through an interpretive lens that assumes the centrality of transcendence in the lives of religious believers (or a certain God-orientation in the case of theists), thereby reflecting a life-centred view of religion/being religious. As a whole, my theologically orientated approach therefore aims to provide a balance of different conceptualisations of religion(s) and what it means to be religious of which cognitive interpretations of religious belief, e.g. stressing conceptual/doctrinal understandings of theistic traditions are only one aspect. Secondly, even if we ignore the particularities of my own proposition and look at definitions of the term 'religion' more generally, we will see that these have been as varied as the people who proposed them and the times in which they emerged. As a consequence, there are myriad ways in which the words 'religion' (in the singular) and 'religions' (in the plural) could theoretically be defined not just in relation to the content-based view of theology considered in this chapter, but also to everything that follows in the rest of the thesis.

A brief overview of different interpretations offered throughout the centuries will illustrate the great complexity of the issue. In antiquity, for example, religion was sometimes associated with the Latin verb '*religare*' (to bind), which led to a view of religion as that which binds God or the gods with humanity. In the Christian tradition, this interpretation was supported by Tertullian (150-220 CE) and Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE)[61]. This etymology, however, is contested. Benveniste, for example, calls it a Christian invention aimed at portraying the relationship humans have with God in terms of an obligation or indebtedness, which is linked to the doctrine of Original Sin (Benveniste, 1969). In the Enlightenment period, in reaction to the conflicts taking place between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism during the European Wars of Religion (1524-1648), religion came to be defined against the perceived superstition of revealed religion as something 'rational' and 'moral' (see, for example Voltaire and Diderot in France, Kant in Germany, or Newton and Locke in England). Romanticism, which can, in turn, be viewed as a counter-movement to the rationalism that had shaped Enlightenment thought, emphasised human 'experience' or 'sentiment' as the heart of religion. Schleiermacher (1768-1834), for instance, called this special awareness or feeling that pervades the lives of religious believers a consciousness of being completely dependent on God (Schleiermacher, 2004 [1830]).

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[61] See Tertullian Collection, Aeterna Press (online), and Augustine's *City of God Book III* in Loeb Classical Library, 1968.

Regarding the 19th and 20th centuries, one might point to the influence that scholars from different academic disciplines have had on the ways the word 'religion' has been defined. Interpreting religion through the lens of Psychology, for example, Freud (1856-1939) argued that being religious is nothing but a neurotic attempt of the human psyche to deal with its *Oedipus complex* – the child's obsessive desire to have sexual relations with its parent of the opposite sex – in which case, religion becomes a strategy for mastering the guilt feelings triggered by this obsession (Freud, 1928, 1990 [1907]). From Marx's socio-political perspective (1818-1883), by contrast, organised religion was defined as a means of class oppression – the 'opium of the people', used by the ruling classes of capitalist societies to reduce the immediate suffering of the poor by providing them with pleasant illusions such as hope for a better life after death, while at the same time, keeping them weak and dependent enough to accept their oppression in this life (Marx, 1844). And for sociologist Durkheim (1856-1917), a religion was a 'unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things' that functions as the glue that binds society together into an organic whole by acting as a source of solidarity and identification for its individual members (in Jones, 1986).

Finally, another way of looking at the task of defining the term 'religion' has been offered by postmodernists in recent years who question the very legitimacy of the term itself. Thus, Fitzgerald sees religion as a modern Western category, which was invented by colonial scholars of the comparative study of religions in the 18th and 19th centuries to make sense of Hinduism and Buddhism in the light of Christian theology (Fitzgerald, 2000), and which is still used by Western nations today to repress non-Western powers through science and secularisation – a phenomenon known as neo-colonialism or neo-imperialism (see also *The Sacred is the Profane*, by Arnal & McCutcheon, 2013). The term 'world religions', has been attacked by postmodernists in a similar vein. Masuzawa argues, for example, that the category of world religions is a modern Eurocentric invention of Christian theology used to preserve the superiority of Christianity on the grounds of its supposed unique status as the only religious tradition in the world which has achieved the goal of universality and perfect transcendence (Masuzawa, 2005).

What we may draw from this overview of different positions is the obvious realisation that the way we define religion(s) is intimately connected with the perspective from which we approach this task (which is shaped by our personal, cultural, possibly religious, but also academic background) as well as the context *in which* and *for which* we seek to provide a definition. At this crucial stage of the discussion, I see it therefore as my responsibility to explain where exactly I am coming from when I define theology and theological understanding, in this chapter, in terms of their objects of study. As explained in chapter 2, my academic background is a combination of Religious Studies and (Religious) Education and the current work focuses, specifically, on the study of key theological content of different theistic religions in schools without a religious affiliation in England and Wales. For this particular context, I believe, it is beneficial to use Smart's phenomenological, multi-dimensional view of religion as a basic definition of religion(s). In summary, Smart claims that religions possess seven different, yet interconnected dimensions: the ritual dimension; the doctrinal and philosophical one; the narrative and mythic; the experiential and emotional; the ethical and legal; the social and institutional; and finally, the material dimension (Smart, 1999, 10-11). Despite significant overlap between these categories, it is helpful to note that these seven dimensions can be further divided into two major sub-groups: those dimensions that belong to the *abstract* realm of religion (the doctrinal, the mythic, the experiential and ethical dimensions) and those that make up the *practical* realm (the ritual, institutional and material dimensions). A juxtaposition of one example of each sub-group will illustrate the difference: the material dimension encompasses the myriad ways in which religious belief is manifested in this world and thus exhibited in material form (Smart, 1999, 11-12). Examples can be found in art, iconography, devotional items, architecture, dress, food, or natural objects and places. The reason why these things belong in this sub-category is that, in one way or another, they are all linked to practical aspects of religion: for instance, in Sikhism the specific type of meal called *langar* is linked to communal practice, namely eating together in the gurdwara, as well as *sewa*, the act of selfless service. In the doctrinal dimension, by comparison, a religion expresses itself in relatively abstract or philosophical terms, primarily as a result of interpreting myths or narratives within that tradition. Smart explains this link between doctrine and narrative by reference to the development of the Christian concept of Trinity:

> 'The structure of the Divine in Christianity has to reflect the narrative of the faith. That narrative postulates certain crucial episodes – the creation of the cosmos, the covenant with Israel, the life of Christ, the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the second coming, and so on. As far as the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament go, it is as though God manifests in three beings – the Father, the Son and the Spirit. Since the early Christians found themselves worshipping God in these differing forms, and since the faith sprang from a strictly monotheistic religion […], it was necessary to devise a formula which could accommodate both the narrative assumptions and the purist view.' (Smart, 1999, 44)

One might, perhaps, question the extent to which Smart's explanation coheres with Christianity's own self-understanding (i.e. generally accepted views within Christianity) of how the concept of the Trinity emerged and was eventually concretised in the form of doctrine, e.g. as an interpretation of monotheism whose original function was not so much to describe or define God and divine attributes, but to express the ways in which Christians should relate to God both in their personal lives and as a religious community. Rather than viewing the Trinity as an abstract concept that has nothing to do with people's lived experience of God's presence, it might thus be possible to find practical life lessons in this doctrine, in the sense that it instructs people to worship God the Father through the Holy Spirit who lives in them, and to follow the example set by God the Son. Yet, even if it is true that the theorisation of such doctrinal aspects of Christianity tends to play a less important role in the personal lives of (trinitarian) Christians than the practical implications of those teachings, it does not follow that the doctrine's theoretical concretisation[62], which took place in the fourth century, is not linked, causally, to Biblical narratives in the way Smart argues above.

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[62] A short summary of the history and development of Christian trinitarian belief illustrates the link between the theoretical concretisation of the doctrine of Trinity and Biblical narratives. The literary foundations of the concept of the Triune God can be found in New Testament passages such as Matthew 28: 19 or John 10: 30 as well as in the writings of some first-century Christians (i.e. in the epistle to the Ephesians written by Ante-Nicene Father, Ignatius). The first, most explicit, mention of the concept, however, can be traced back to the works of Latin theologian, Tertullian, in the third century who argued on the basis of these first-century writings that Father, Son and Holy spirit were 'one in essence – not in person' (Tertullian Collection, Chapter XXII). Later in 325, the Council of Nicea (led by Athanasius) further defined the relationship, in this case specifically between Father and Son, as a reaction to the controversial teachings of Arius who claimed that God existed prior to the Son and saw Jesus as God's first creation. In particular, the Council established the doctrine of the Trinity as orthodoxy by describing Jesus Christ as 'God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father' (Placher & Nelson, 2015, 53). Given the strong focus on scripture evident in the process of concretisation of the doctrine of Trinity, we may therefore conclude that Smart's claim about the link between doctrine and narratives of faith is plausible even if it is true that doctrinal aspects of religion may not always play a crucial role in the religious life of the adherent. For this reason, I will consider it to be useful to the study of religions in schools to accept Smart's multi-dimensional theory and to think of the theological concepts and doctrines found in different theistic religions as philosophical interpretations of certain aspects of sacred texts or narratives to do with relating humanity to the divine and vice versa and hence, as examples of the respective doctrinal/philosophical dimension of those traditions.

Moreover, it is important to realise that, even though some dimensions may have more significance in the context of one religion than another, Smart argues that, regardless of which religious tradition we consider, these seven dimensions are almost always present, thus providing a useful *scheme of study*. The advantage of such a view, in the educational setting of RE, is that it provides us with a framework for the study of religions without having to define, exactly, what religions are (e.g. theistic or non-theistic, a way of life, a unique or ordinary type of experience, a system of beliefs and practices distinct from or included in culture, etc.), as it suffices for this theory that religions invariably possess a number of recognisable elements *that can be studied*, both in their particularity/individuality and as interconnected components of a greater whole, commonly called 'religion' in the English and other Latin-influenced languages. From this perspective, it is therefore justifiable to refer to the theological, with all its individual aspects including theological concepts and doctrines, as one dimension of religion – the overall phenomenon studied in RE, which includes, among other things, a variety of individual traditions.

This, however, leads us to a final issue to raise in this context, namely that utilising the terms 'religions' and 'religion' almost interchangeably (as I have done to some extent in the above paragraphs) can be problematic because it implies that the difference in meaning generated by the two applications in singular and plural is insignificant. For me, whether this is true or not depends – again – on the intention with which these terms are employed and in which circumstance. In the context of Religious Education, complications may sometimes arise when 'religion' is not used, numerically, as the singular form of 'religions' (as in: 'There are three main Abrahamic *religions*. Islam is one such *religion*.'), but more generically as a hypernym classifying the subject's overall object of study. For instance, at several points in the *Non-Statutory National Framework for RE* (QCA) (2004), reference is made to Grimmitt's notions of 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion (see, for example, QCA, 2004, 11, 13, 14, 16), and there is no explanation as to what that entails and how studying religion might be distinct from studying individual religious traditions or branches of them (see Grimmitt, 1987). One reason why 'religion' in this context is a problematic term is that it can be interpreted to imply that there is something like an essence or common core identifiable in all religions (compare criticisms of Teece's soteriological approach in chapter 3 and section 7.2 below), which makes it possible to ignore the significance of differences in belief and practice that exist both between and within religious traditions and the role these differences may play in the self-understanding(s) of individual religions – a point that has been made by RS/RE scholars such as MacIntyre (1985); MacGrane (1989); Sacks (2003); and Barnes and Wright (2006). It is therefore important to stress that whenever I use the term 'religion' in the singular in the context of the study of religion(s) in schools in this work, it is neither my intention to suggest that all religions are essentially the same or that differences between them do not matter, nor do I wish to imply that the study of religion is an activity that is even separable from studying religions. What I am hinting at instead, in these situations, is the possibility that there is also something about the *phenomenon of religion* (understood, simply, as the fact that there are religions in this world) that students may learn as part of their study of individual traditions. Or, in the specific case of theistic religions: the possibility that there is also something to be learned about theistic belief as a phenomenon that exists in the world when we study individual monotheistic and polytheistic traditions and the ways in which they understand the divine, e.g. by investigating, and perhaps comparing and contrasting their key theological concepts and teachings in a content-based theological approach. (This idea of potential interreligious comparison will be presented and justified in more detail in chapters 6 and 7.)

### 5.2.4 Belief in God – The Defining Feature of Theistic Religions, But Not Necessarily the 'Heart of Religion'?

As indicated above, it is important to realise that the boundaries between the seven dimensions of religion(s), identified by Smart, are never clear-cut. For instance, devotional items such as statues or icons of deities in Hinduism that belong to the practical sub-group (here, the material dimension) play not only a crucial role in religious practices/rituals (in this case, *murtipuja* or image worship); they are also linked to both individual and communal religious experiences as well as doctrinal aspects of the Hindu tradition, both of which are counted among the abstract aspects of religion. Here, one might point to the experience of *darshana*, the 'divine seeing' that makes the relationship between devotee and deity a unique, reciprocal encounter.[63] Or, to put it the other way around, what might seem to be at first glance a purely abstract philosophical concept (*darshana* – the idea of the auspicious sight of a holy person or deity and the reciprocal relation of seeing and being seen in the act of *murtipuja*) is at the same time intimately related to practical aspects of Hinduism, revealed in the material culture and ritualistic dimension of the tradition. With regard to the study of religions, I therefore argue that, even though it is useful to think of religions as comprising several different dimensions (as a means to structure one's overview of a given tradition, for instance), the internal interconnectedness of all these dimensions makes it possible to discover, in each dimensional manifestation, a multitude of reflections of, and important links to, other aspects of the same religion. Given that, from this perspective, each individual dimension of the sacred already includes all other dimensions, it becomes less important to establish definite hierarchies in the study of religion that identify, as a general principle, more and less valuable objects of study in the pursuit of religious knowledge and understanding. A similar conclusion can be drawn with respect to methodological choices. Even though it is certainly true that an interest in a specific dimensional manifestation such as concepts and doctrines relating to God may suggest the use of a particular methodological approach (e.g. Systematic Theology), thereby implying perhaps that it is more suitable than others, this does not mean that such a choice also reflects a general methodological hierarchy in the study of religions.

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[63] The example of *darshana* is taken from Knott, E. (2000). *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxon/New York: Oxford University Press (2000, 51).

Despite this commitment to methodological equality in RE, I need to make clear that the philosophical question of whether there is something that 'lies at the heart of (theistic) religion(s)', thereby deserving greater attention than other objects of study in Religious Education (as Chipperton et al.'s theological approach implies; compare Copley, 2005), is not necessarily answered in the negative here. What I am arguing is just that dealing with this question is a complex, theoretical/philosophical matter, which – for reasons explained below – might never generate definite answers at a practical level and more importantly, is not even necessary to justify the approach to theology promoted in this study. Thus, it is certainly possible to claim that there could, theoretically at least, be *one* thing amongst the many aspects of religions (e.g. explorable through Smart's multi-dimensional phenomenological approach) that makes a religion most like a religion – although the next question would then be: why just 'one'? This might entail that the study of religions should also prioritise related objects of study and the best means of exploring them. In the case of theistic religions, such an argument could look like this, for example: *if it were true* that some type of belief in God/the divine constitutes the absolute core or essence of religious belief in theistic traditions (which is more than just saying that it is the defining feature of theism), it would follow that studying concepts, teachings and practices relating to God/the divine (i.e. theological subject matter) is most central to understanding these traditions, in which case it could also be concluded that approaches commonly adopted in Theology are the best methodological choice to study such religions.

Yet, there are several problems involved in this logic. The most delicate issue in this argumentation, as we can see in the antecedent of the above hypothetical proposition, is that it clearly touches upon questions of truth in the context of religion, in this case that God is the one, true essence of religious belief, which (from a theistic perspective at least) presupposes that God exists. However, the validity of religious truth claims like these, no matter how fruitful philosophical discussions arising from them may be, can never be assessed for truth or falsity in practice. What I mean by this is that, although both religious and non-religious people will certainly make such assessments at a regular basis (e.g. *that* God does or does not exist) – especially when arguing their case from a definite (i.e. non-agnostic) faith or secular perspective – whether or not their arguments are sound is a different matter that cannot be solved at the level of theoretical reflection. This is because any relevant questions that need to be asked to make the assessment (e.g. is it true that God exists and is hence, legitimately identifiable as the essence of religious belief?) could only be answered from a non-human standpoint of omniscience that does not only know what makes a religion a religion, but also whether religious belief, by its nature, directs itself towards God (be it one or many) and whether that God truly exists or is a product of human creative imagination.

Another complication provoked by the claim made by Chipperton et al. that there is something that lies at the heart of religion(s) is that, even if it were possible to identify the unique essence of one religion, the same aspect might be less relevant to the study of other religions or even branches of the same religious tradition. Also drawing on Smart's seven-dimensional approach, Keith Ward argues, for instance, that it would be wrong to focus too much on (e.g. theological) doctrines when trying to describe the phenomenon of religion because, for some traditions, this dimension will be much less important than others (Ward, 2003, 273). He uses the example of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) as a Christian branch that would define itself almost entirely without reference to doctrines[64] (Ward, 2003, 273-274). Even though Quakers are part of the spectrum of Christianity, which is arguably a religion that ascribes much significance to doctrinal questions, this branch emphasises mystical aspects of religion and individual spiritual experience much more than doctrines. In other words, even if we *bracket* questions of absolute truth and limit our focus to the level of academic inquiry, it is difficult to justify the attempt of deciding what may or may not lie at the heart of religions, let alone religion. Academics may argue about such matters, and the debate about the truth or falsity of claims about what is essential to a religion or religion as a whole is certainly not just legitimate, but also important. Yet, using potential conclusions of this debate as a basis for methodological choices in multi-faith RE is a somewhat different matter. As already argued above (section 5.1) – how should we side with any given conclusion, without making ontological claims about which we know there is profound disagreement not just among scholars of religion, but also religious and non-religious people worldwide? Education (including Religious Education) in a secular, liberal, democratic state should certainly avoid making such ontological assumptions with regard to religion.

Fortunately, however, answering questions like these is not relevant to the task of this study. The most vital reason why I have decided to refrain from an in-depth philosophical discussion of the question of whether belief in God lies at the heart of religion(s) is therefore that I do not think it is necessary to clarify this issue to be able to justify the theologically orientated approach to non-confessional, multi-faith RE promoted here. This is because the greatest benefit of identifying concepts and teachings relating to God as the most important focal points in the study of (theistic) religions would be to establish a methodological hierarchy that puts theological methods at the top, which is a point I am not intending to make. As the third principle introduced in section 5.2.2 shows, the practice of studying theological content of different theistic religions in multi-faith RE is viewed here not as *the way* into deepening learning in RE, but as a legitimate part of an interdisciplinary, multi-methodological approach to the study of religions that concentrates on one important aspect of theistic religions – belief in the divine. In other words, there is a difference between viewing theology as the only lens through which to look at religion and religious phenomena in individual traditions and studying the theological dimensions of different religions as part of a broader approach that takes account of other aspects of religion as well. To be suitable for non-faith school settings, I argue that theology should always be regarded as one lens to use in the study of religions rather than a holistic approach to the study of religion as such. This does not mean that understanding theological content can never be evaluated as significant or even essential to the study of religions in schools. Yet, the term 'essential' needs to be used with caution here. Instead of identifying belief in God as the ultimate essence of religion (which implies a certain hierarchy of subject content and methods to be employed in RE), it is much more acceptable, in non-faith academic settings, to see the development of theological understanding(s) as essential in the sense that it helps students to become religiously literate *in relation to theistic religions and their theological/doctrinal dimensions*. Another way of putting it would therefore be that students develop 'theistic religious literacy', not religious literacy as such, by focusing on theological content in RE.

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[64] One exception could be the central idea within Quaker religious thought of 'That of God in Everyone' because this expression is sometimes known as 'the Quaker creed' amongst Friends (Benson, 1970, 21). The idea that there is literally a 'bit of God' in every man goes back to George Fox's interpretation of a passage in Romans 1 paraphrased by him as: 'that which may be known of God is manifest in man, for God has showed it unto them' (Fox, 2007 [1924], 55). Benson argues: while there may not be much that Quakers agree upon, doctrinally, the belief that '[i]n every man there is a witness for God that summons him to remember the Creator' is absolutely central to Quaker theology (Benson, 1970, 5).

This specification leads to another realisation. I argue that students can only become religiously literate if they have a theological understanding or theological understandings of theistic religions. This means that if a student understood theistic religions in every way other than the theological, I would not describe them as sufficiently 'religiously literate' on the whole. This, however, applies – specifically and exclusively – to his or her understanding(s) of theistic traditions, and one can assume that the same logic holds true with regard to the study of non-theistic religions. To clarify: students could be religiously literate, but *not* possess theological understanding(s) in relation to non-theistic religions, which then raises the equally difficult (and perhaps unanswerable) question of what the defining feature(s) of non-theistic religions could be. I would therefore conclude in the same way I have already done in the context of religious understanding in section 4.1 that religious literacy should not be viewed as an all-or-nothing affair, in the sense that one either has it completely or not. Students who do not understand theistic religions in a theological way, but have deep knowledge and understanding of them in various other ways (i.e. sociological, historical, psychological, phenomenological, etc.) are surely religiously literate to a degree, but it is arguable that they would lack important insights central to theistic traditions such as their adherents' orientation towards the divine, which might – in turn – reflect important aspects of the self-understanding(s) of these religions.

So, to summarise: in saying that theological understanding is crucial in RE, this study does not assert that all subject content (i.e. all phenomena of all 'dimensions of the sacred', to use Smart's expression) should be understood in a manner determined by one part (God). Instead, it is proposed to apply the viewpoint promoted here mainly to the theological dimension of religions as a means to shed light on the role and significance of belief in the divine in theistic religions. As the second principle introduced in section 5.2.2 suggests, this also reflects a particular understanding of the relationship of theological and religious literacy: gaining theological understanding is viewed here as an integral part of becoming religiously literate that may deepen understanding in RE. It is not, however, a path to the essence of religion, nor should choosing a theologically orientated focus be seen as a guarantee for deep learning, if it is used in isolation from other approaches.

### 5.2.5 Specification of Theological Subject Content: Primary Versus Secondary Theological Objects of Study

Having defined the relationship of this theology-centred approach to other methodologies, it is now necessary to specify more clearly what *type of theological subject content* will ultimately be drawn from the proposed examination of the doctrinal/philosophical dimensions of theistic religions. In other words, the key question that has not really been answered yet is: by what criteria can we define something as inherently theological in nature? The significant overlap of the different dimensions of religion(s) complicates this issue. Given this interconnectedness, it is theoretically possible to define almost any dimensional manifestation of religious belief or practice in theistic religions as theological, or theologically relevant, in one way or another. At least, this is true when one makes theoretically identifiable connections explicit – that is when non-doctrinal/non-philosophical religious phenomena are understood or reinterpreted in relation to the doctrinal/philosophical.

As we have seen, this may even include aspects of religion that, at first glance, clearly belong in the practical categories proposed by Smart. For instance, examining the hierarchical institutional structures of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) would be seen, without doubt, as a model example of studying an aspect of the institutional or organisational dimension of Christianity or more precisely, a specific Christian denomination. Looking at the way in which this example of what Linda Woodhead calls

'Church Christianity[65]' relates to issues of authority and interpretations of the divine, however, will illustrate that such a study also touches upon theological questions (Woodhead, 2004). For Woodhead, Church Christianity is characterised by its commitment to hierarchical structures of the church community. This is evident, for example, in the Roman Catholic stress on the authority of the clergy who are believed to be mediators between heaven and earth. Only they are permitted to celebrate sacraments such as the Eucharist or baptism – a phenomenon referred to as 'sacerdolatism' (Woodhead, 2004, 48). Moreover, in Roman Catholicism, interpretation of the Bible requires the mediation of a member of the clergy and so, is not left to the laity as much as it would be in examples of Biblical Christianity such as liberal Evangelicalism. For Stefanie Sinclair, this shows that Church Christianity is based on the belief that sacred power is 'located over and above the individual', flowing down from the top, God, and then, through the clergy, to the believer (Sinclair, 2006, 89). In other words, ultimate authority is located in the Church and its sacraments, rather than in the spiritual experience of the religious adherent, for example – a stress found more strongly in liberal versions of Mystical Christianity such as Quakerism. According to Woodhead's threefold categorisation (Church, Biblical and Mystical Christianity), this 'power from above' may then be interpreted in different ways: whereas conservative Catholic strands tend to see God's authority as transcendent, more liberal circles interpret it as transcendent and rational, and Catholic Pentecostal branches, for example, might regard ultimate authority to be both transcendent and located in human experience (see Woodhead, 2004, 104). Even if the summary and examples presented here might be a bit simplistic, we do not need to go into more detail to realise that these considerations have important implications for the project of this study. We realise, for example, that from a theological perspective, the study of the institutional structures of a particular Christian denomination (despite its apparent practical/material focus) can raise questions about the exact definition of God's nature, e.g. as transcendent, immanent or a combination of both. This leads us to the conclusion that even those objects of study that do not seem to be inherently theological in their essence may still provide insight into important theological issues.

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[65] According to Linda Woodhead, there are three types of Christianity: Church Christianity, Biblical Christianity and Mystical Christianity. Church Christianity comprises Catholicism, Anglicanism and Protestantism, which can be further subdivided into conservative, liberal and Pentecostal strands, each characterised by their respective understanding of authority as transcendent, rational and experiential. Biblical Christianity includes Evangelicalism, similarly dividable into fundamental, liberal and charismatic movements. And Mystical Christianity consists of Mystical Eastern Orthodoxy (transcendent authority), Christian Science (rational authority) and finally Quakerism (experiential authority) (Woodhead, 2004, 104).

This, however, is not to say that it always makes sense or is desirable to engage in such acts of connecting non-theological content with theological content. Sometimes such a viewpoint might even conceal other more, important perspectives – such as the possibility that the English Reformation was more concerned with ecclesiological, than theological questions, in which case a (church) historical lens would arguably provide more valuable insights. Therefore, it is important to stress that this should not create the impression that teachers of RE should *generally* prioritise in their lessons aspects of the theological dimension of religions and use practical issues like these only to shed light on theological questions. This would lead to the controversial conclusion that practical issues are merely outworkings of theological assumptions and may hence be less worthy to be studied in their own right. Instead, the above examples were meant to establish two things: first, if in a multi-methodologically developed scheme of work the students' focus is turned to theological subject matter and methods at a given point in time, it can sometimes be useful to draw links between new elements in their learning and seemingly unrelated lesson content that was covered before. This possibility is not exclusive to theology, of course. Similarly, important links could be drawn between two or more other religious dimensions as well as apparently unrelated examples of the same, e.g. practical, category. We have already considered such an example: the meal, *langar*, in Sikhism (a material manifestation of religion, here of the food group) is also linked to the act of *sewa*, the practical guideline that Sikhs should give up part of their time and provide service to the Khalsa and other people. Making students aware of the interconnectedness of the different dimensional manifestations they study, we may therefore conclude, could help them to initially build clusters of interrelated subject content, which might later evolve into one growing network of RE-specific knowledge. This, I have argued, can be seen as developing depth of learning in RE as there is certainly something more sophisticated about this type of understanding religion(s) – the ability to understand the part in the light of a conception of the whole by drawing interconnections between individual aspects of that which is learned. This does not mean that we need some kind of meta-narrative on the basis of which we interpret religions (compare Teece's soteriological framework for RE, considered in sections 3.3 and 7.2), but it is possible to help students to understand one part in the light of other, logically connected parts so as to learn something, in addition, about the phenomenon of theism itself.

Second, given the fact that the dimensional interrelatedness works in all directions, there is no need to establish any universally applicable hierarchy of RE subject content and methods. Whether an issue is considered to be of primary or secondary importance in a given unit of work depends on the dimensional focus and method(s) adopted by the teacher at that stage of his or her use of the multi-methodologically developed work scheme. Or to put it the other way around, just because some objects of study are sometimes of secondary importance, *when using a particular methodological lens* (say church architecture when the focus is on ontological/epistemological questions and the method used might be Critical Realism), it does not follow that the same subject content cannot be classed as a primary object of study at a different point in time (e.g. when the focus is on material culture).

In the case of our theological focus, for example, we could distinguish between primary and secondary theological objects of study in the following way: **primary theological objects of study** are central elements in the abstract/doctrinal realm of religions that relate to God or other forms of ultimate reality, i.e. concepts of God and teachings relating to belief in the divine. **Secondary theological objects of study** are those aspects of religions that belong to other dimensions but possess important theological facets and/or might be understood differently, if not in greater depth, when interpreted, additionally, in the light of the theological concepts considered. To give theology a clearly defined scope within multi-methodological, interdisciplinary approaches to the study of religions in schools, I would suggest prioritising primary theological subject matter over potential secondary sources of investigation in each religion (whenever the focus is on the theological/doctrinal dimension of religious traditions). Content selection could thus involve two steps: first, an in-depth consideration of key concepts and doctrines relating to God/the divine in the given theistic tradition; and second, less time-intensively perhaps, an examination of a selection of other aspects of religion that generate theological associations and may thus create logical connections between lesson content covered at different stages in Religious Education (i.e. across work schemes, years and Key Stages). Since this prioritisation, however, is one that occurs only *within* a given methodological approach which, in turn, is part of a broader multi-methodological, interdisciplinary pedagogy of RE, as opposed to occurring *between* individual methods and methodologies, it should be clear that this study does not promote any general methodological hierarchy in the study of religions. On the contrary, the reason to include such secondary theological objects of study in theology-centred investigations of religions is not to use the theological focus for religion as a whole (thereby implying superiority over other approaches), but to invite students to discover, e.g. through interdisciplinary work, the unique interconnectedness of the various individual aspects of religions.

The advantage of choosing this slightly limited scope for content selection is that it provides a middle way between the two rather extreme positions about the role of theology in RE discussed above (see section 5.1). As we will see in chapter 6 of this thesis, this will help us to counter dismissive views about the value of theology that do not ascribe any significance to theological understanding in multi-faith RE, constructively, without having to accept one of the greatest shortcomings of current Christian (denominational) theological positions in the context of multi-faith RE – their inability to free themselves sufficiently from their view of the special status of Christian theology in the study of religion(s). The next chapter will also be concerned with the question of how such an interreligious conception of theology (defined in terms of its content) can be embedded in an existentially-focused, interpretive framework, structured around the organising principle of the relationship that religious believers have with the divine – as introduced in chapter 4, section 4.1.2.

# 6 Towards an Interreligious, Transcendence-Orientated Approach to Theological Content in Multi-Faith RE

This chapter further develops the content-based view of theology presented in the previous chapter by embedding it in a broader interpretive framework for furthering theological understanding(s) that assumes the centrality of transcendence in religious belief which arguably manifests itself in a certain 'God-orientation' in the lives of theists. (This idea of transcendence, interpreted here to encompass all notions of the divine including God, gods or ultimate reality, was introduced in section 1.4 and will be examined more closely below). As indicated in chapters 4 and 5, the main aim of this further development is to balance philosophical focal points in the conceptualisation of religion(s), e.g. emphasising conceptual/doctrinal aspects, with a more life-centred view of theistic faith that defines being religious in this context as standing in a meaningful relationship with the divine. Approaches to RE that deliberately combine different conceptions of religion/being religious (e.g. selected for particular purposes in the study of religions such as the promotion of theological understandings of a variety of theistic religions), I argued, are preferable over those that work with a single lens because they are more likely to reveal to students the great complexity of the phenomenon of religion and internal/external diversity of individual traditions.

Another reason why the idea of transcendence- and/or God-orientation is an important one to consider in the pursuit of developing students' theological understanding(s) in RE is that it provides a useful organising principle on the basis of which the study of different types of theological content (see primary/secondary objects of study specified above) can be conducted both in *systematic* and (potentially) *comparative* ways. This is to avoid, as Lundie rightly demands, that theological learning in RE only amounts to 'the heaping of doctrines' in the absence of any structure and pedagogical purpose other than the 'rote learning of definitions' (Lundie, 2018, 354; compare section 4.2.3). As we will see in this chapter, choosing the idea of the centrality of transcendence in religious belief as an interpretive lens through which to investigate theological subject matter is a good solution as it not only prevents such undesirable learning outcomes, but also gives students the chance to explore theological content systematically, with a special focus on believers' perspectives and, most importantly, across religious boundaries, which opens up possibilities of interreligious comparison. This combined content-based/life-centred approach to theology, I will suggest in accordance with my definition of deep learning above (compare section 5.1.1), provides students with deep insights into the phenomenon of theistic belief as it enables them to: (i) make logical connections between various aspects of individual traditions; (ii) draw conceptual links between theological content of different theistic religions; (iii) identify similarities and differences in theistic belief between and within individual faith traditions; and (iv) become aware of (e.g. conceptual, philosophical, etc.) connections between a wide range of lesson content covered at different stages in RE.

Before presenting this interpretive lens, rooted in the idea of transcendence-/God-orientation in theistic belief in more detail, however, I need to justify why I have chosen to concentrate on the perspectives of believers – in other words: 'insiders' of theistic faith traditions – in this second part of the development of my interreligious approach to theological content. The next section therefore looks into the reasoning behind this decision.

## 6.1 The Centrality of Transcendence in Religious Belief – A Useful Focus in Interreligious Theology?

My decision to focus on insider perspectives in the further development of my interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach to theological content relates to my discussion of potential links between students' religious literacy and the question of 'adequate' representation of (here: theistic) religions in RE (see section 4.2). The main argument made in this context was that to understand theistic belief in depth, it is important to gain insight into the self-understanding(s) of the respective traditions studied in RE, which are, for example, reflected in the ways in which adherents of those traditions perceive the divine and their own relationships with the divine, both at an individual and communal level. Whether or not students develop in-depth understandings of theistic traditions and become religiously literate in relation to them in RE, I therefore concluded, is ultimately also dependent on the subject's success in offering God-centred representations of these religions (because these reflect the views and experiences of believers in the divine). This, I should specify, is not the same as saying that there is only one 'accurate' representation of theistic religions and that this must necessarily be a God-centred one. In fact, I have used the term 'adequate' above to indicate that the argument I am making here is not a matter of accuracy or inaccuracy (interpreted, for example, in absolute terms) in the context of representation, but a matter of understanding theistic belief from a particular perspective and with regard to certain criteria, deemed suitable for the task at hand: understanding *belief* – or to be more precise, theistic belief as it is expressed and experienced by the believer. It is important to consider these choices more closely now.

One reason why '*accurate* representation' would be a misleading term is that it is arguable, for instance, that those who approach the task of understanding religion(s) from other (e.g. 'outsider') perspectives – Marxian or Freudian views would be two possible philosophical examples here – might have a very different view of what is 'central' to religious/theistic traditions than religious believers. A key question to raise with regard to the notion of accuracy in the context of God-centred representations of theistic religions would hence be: accurate, *according to whom*? And *why*? Drawing on Marx's functionalist interpretation of religion, for instance, one might claim that religion, and Christian monotheism in particular, are best understood as illusions providing reasons and excuses to keep society functioning in the capitalist system (the 'opium of the people'; compare section 5.2.3). It is evident that this is not how most Christians would understand their religion nor does it reflect how the Christian Churches (e.g. CofE, RCC) have traditionally explained their existence and significance in the world; yet, for those who approach religion(s) from this particular Marxian perspective, such an explanation might appear to be a fairly 'accurate' representation of what religion (and Christianity, specifically) is. So, who says that this outsiders' account, drawing upon political, social and economic history, is not a more appropriate lens through which to study Christian monotheism? Or to put it more generally: why should the study of theistic religions ever prioritise insider views over those of outsiders as a potential path to (in-depth) understanding(s) in RE?

Such examples, however, can be easily dismissed as criticisms as they fail to concentrate sufficiently on *belief* as opposed to religions and religious phenomena in the wider sense, neither of which are the focus of my argument about potential requirements of (theistic) religious understanding. The main point I make in this context is that, to understand theistic beliefs (including the act of believing as viewed and experienced by believers), it is important to study believers' views and experiences so as to try to gain insight into what it means to have a theistic faith for those who believe in the divine, which leads us directly to insider perspectives. In other words (to use the above example), if I want to understand Christian beliefs about God, it is irrelevant that outsiders of this tradition and/or theistic belief, in particular, may interpret the given phenomenon in different ways or that there are also Christians who do not regard themselves as theists. The same logic also applies to possible criticisms of my focus on the idea of God-centredness in theistic belief, more generally. As indicated in the context of my definition of theism in chapter 1 (section 1.4), my study recognises the possibility that some religious adherents, although identifying themselves with a theistic faith tradition, may (at a personal level) not believe in God or any other type of ultimate reality and that there are also whole branches within theistic traditions for which belief in God is not a faith requirement (e.g. liberal Quakerism in Christianity). However, given that my research focuses, specifically, on belief in God/the divine and, empirically speaking, theistic traditions normally include belief in God (regardless of internal exceptions), it is justifiable to choose the concept of God-centredness or God-orientation as an interpretive lens through which to explore insider perspectives on theistic belief. This is neither to imply that all affiliates of theistic religions believe in God/the divine, nor that those who do will necessarily spend their lives thinking about God all the time, but simply that a certain orientation towards the divine (discernible in the lives of most theists) is a common feature of theistic belief and hence, a useful interpretive lens for interreligious theology. And a final response to the above objection is that the interreligious approach to theology I promote is not just believer-/life-centred in the way described above, but also content-based, working with conceptions of religion that emphasise conceptual, doctrinal aspects, for example (see chapter 5). The focus on believers' perspectives is chosen primarily to counter-balance these rationalistic views of theistic belief with a more existentially orientated, life-centred view of theistic faith. It is not, however, the only conceptualisation of religion/being religious with which this study operates. It would therefore be wrong to say that believers' perspectives are 'prioritised' over other viewpoints in this thesis. (With these clarifications in mind, we should be well prepared for a closer consideration of the idea of the centrality of transcendence as a possible interpretive lens to use for the study of theological content in multi-faith RE.)

### 6.1.1 Transcendence-Orientation as an Interpretive Lens for Interreligious Theology and the Dangers of Essentialism/Relativism in RS

As we saw in chapter 3, section 3.3, one methodological viewpoint to potentially draw from when developing an *interreligious* and *transcendence-orientated* approach to theological content in RE is Teece's soteriological framework for Religious Education (Teece, 2008, 2010b, 2012), conceptually based on Hick's pluralist interpretation of religion (Hick, 1989). In contrast to the other examples of theological approaches considered in this thesis, which I evaluated as too Christian-centred either in their original methodological orientation (Cooling's concept-cracking/The Stapleford Project; Copley et al.'s Biblos Project; the CofE Education Office's Understanding Christianity project, etc.) or in their current practical application (Reed and Freathy's Narrative Theology), Teece's soteriological framework is the only model for RE teaching that is truly *interreligious* and *God- or Reality-centred* at the same time in the sense that it was designed for the study of key concepts – here: to do with salvation/liberation – of different religions and also applied, in a number of theoretical examples, to all major traditions studied in RE (see, for example, Teece, 2012). It might be worth repeating here (compare section 3.3.), that Teece's framework is not explicitly theology-centred as it does not limit itself to theistic religions, but can serve as an example of an interreligious theological approach, concerned specifically with the development of students' conceptual understandings of religions, if one applies it only to mono- and polytheistic traditions in the way I suggest in this thesis. The reason for that was that Teece proposes a systematic (i.e. soteriologically focused) study of key concepts, related to ultimate reality/transcendence in individual traditions. In theistic traditions, that reality is God, gods, or the divine, more generally, which means that the main concepts studied within these religions are automatically theological ones since they are ultimately connected to the believer's orientation towards that divine reality.

One argument that could be made in favour of such a soteriology-focused, theological approach to the study of religions, in general, is that salvation (or liberation in the case of Eastern traditions) is a topic where most key theological issues converge, which might make it a particularly useful starting point for developing a *systematic* approach to the study of the theological dimension of any (theistic) faith tradition. If Systematic Theology, for example, is understood as an academic discipline focusing on the interconnectedness of theological doctrines/concepts in a given tradition, it is possible to select salvation as a central aspect of theistic belief on the basis of which other fundamental doctrines, concepts and theological issues (in the case of Christianity: creation, incarnation, resurrection, good and evil, etc.) can be explored and set in relation to one another in a logical, meaningful (in this case, soteriologically interpreted) way. Furthermore, the fact that such a soteriological, systematic approach to studying the theological dimension of one tradition could then be applied to other theistic religions – as Teece does by focusing on the idea of human spiritual transformation in each major religion – might then make it particularly useful for the context of RE in schools without a religious affiliation where theology should arguably be construed as a non-confessional practice, applicable to all theistic religions (see principle 1, introduced in section 5.2.2 of this thesis).

However, as criticised above, serious problems can result from approaches to the study of religions that seek justification in a specific interpretation of the nature and purpose of religion and promote this, exclusively, as the best and only lens to use in RE. For example, positions like Hick's, making claims about a potential common core or 'essence' of religions (i.e. with the intention of providing an egalitarian approach to interfaith relations and dialogue), have been deemed to ignore the particularity of individual traditions and are therefore, prone to the charges of essentialism and cultural and religious relativism in Religious Studies (Barnes & Wright, 2006; D'Costa, 1996, 2009; MacIntyre, 1985; Wright, 1998). Whilst a closer (re-)consideration of these criticisms must be postponed to the next and final chapter where the focus will be, explicitly, on issues of universality and particularity in the (comparative) study of religions, both generally and with regard to my interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach to RE, these preliminary considerations of Teece/Hick lead us to an important conclusion informing the present chapter. A major task to achieve, when developing an *interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach that explores theological content, systematically* – as I intend to do in this chapter – is to be aware of the dangers of essentialism and relativism, involved in the (comparative) study of religions, and to provide an interpretive lens which, although allowing for theological comparison between faith traditions, is sensitive to the significance of differences in belief and practice that exist both within and between religions worldwide.[66]

To reach this goal, I will engage in the two tasks of providing a *systematic* and potentially *comparative* approach to theological content in two (more or less) separate steps, concentrating on the systematic component mainly in the present chapter and dealing with questions of universality and particularity arising in the context of Comparative Religion mainly in the next and final one (chapter 7). For these reasons, the present chapter will be structured as follows: drawing on Anna Strhan's (2010) proposition for a 'religious education otherwise', the remainder of section 6.1 will concentrate on the possibility of integrating the content-based view of theology (described in the previous chapter) with an existentially orientated, life-centred view of religion, rooted in the idea of the centrality of transcendence in religious belief. In particular, I will consider how the centrality of transcendence, which manifests itself in an orientation towards the divine in theistic faith traditions, can be used as an organising principle on which to base systematic God-centred investigations of theistic religions in multi-faith RE. For this, I will argue, it is necessary to be aware of certain problems involved in Strhan's interpretation of transcendence and to find a way to overcome them, thus offering a modified view of the scope and purposes of transcendence-orientated theology in RE. Section 6.2 will then present this alternative existentially orientated lens, structured around the organising principle of transcendence-/God-orientation in more detail, focusing specifically on the issue of required critical distance from God as an object of study in RE. This will also include a brief presentation of four areas of investigation to use as an interpretive framework in interreligious, transcendence-orientated theology (based, methodologically, on what I identify as 'procedural agnosticism') and an example of a practical application of this approach, based on the principles of Scriptural Reasoning. This will prepare us for the final task of this thesis to be completed in chapter 7: considering potentially comparative elements of this approach with regard to questions of universality and particularity in the study of religions and finding the right balance between the two in the proposed interreligious methodology.

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[66] It might be worth specifying, in this context, that there is a difference between 'being aware' of the dangers of thinking about religion(s) in a particular and possibly essentialist way and 'never allowing' oneself or others to think about religions in such a way. With regard to Teece's soteriological view of religion(s), I would therefore conclude that it is less of a problem to adopt this lens, temporarily, so long as it is merely used as one amongst many, e.g. within a broader, more balanced pedagogical approach that allows for a constant reflection upon, and evaluation of all interpretive lenses used in RE.

### 6.1.2 Strhan's Appeal to the Centrality of Transcendence in Religious Belief: A Critical Response to Critical Realism

Strhan's argument about the centrality of transcendence in religious belief is best understood in relation to her objection to critical realist approaches, promoted, for example, by Wright (1993, 2004) and Barnes (2009b) as a corrective to 'liberal spiritual RE', which they see exemplified in experiential/phenomenological approaches, but also Teece's soteriological framework (Barnes & Wright, 2006; see also chapter 7, section 7.2). Therefore, I will first summarise those points of this debate that are relevant to my research focus and then set my own development of an interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach to theology in relation to certain questions and problems arising from this discussion.

Strhan proposes the view that the influence of Critical Realism on the development of RE has led to a regrettable dominance of philosophy, ethics and critical thinking in Religious Education (Strhan, 2010; compare Conroy, 2016). The reason why this is regrettable, she argues, is that it shifts students' focus too far away from individual (personal) human experience of religion to a more general (impersonal) philosophical engagement with religious beliefs, concerned primarily with issues of doctrinal truth. This influence, she claims, is visible in recent (i.e. pre-2016) GCSE specifications emphasising students' ability to evaluate arguments for and against the existence of God and to assess religious teachings mainly in the context of contemporary ethical dilemmas found in such issues as genetic engineering, abortion or voluntary euthanasia which only have marginal relevance to religion (Strhan, 2010, 30-31). According to Strhan, the problem with adopting such a predominantly philosophical/ethical lens is that students thus spend much of their time in Religious Education concentrating on 'the question of what really is the "ultimate truth"', which 'distorts religion into a matter of true v. false knowledge' (Strhan, 2010, 23, 33). It is arguable that this criticism – although aimed at GCSE specifications used before 2016 – can be easily extended to RS/Ethics/Philosophy specifications, including A Level, introduced after that date. Here, one could point, for example, to current AS/A-Level specifications in Religious Studies of examination boards such as AQA (see AQA, 2016) and WJEC Eduqas (see WJEC Eduqas, 2016), both of which exhibit a strong focus on the development of students' critical analysis and ethical evaluation skills in their methodological designs (compare Copley's similar argument, discussed in section 1.1).

Whilst explaining why I believe such examination specifications can be rightly accused of misrepresenting religion and religions in the classroom as matters of 'true' versus 'false' knowledge, it is important to clarify that it is not my intention to dismiss critical realist approaches in principle here. Philosophy of Religion and Ethics, for instance, are legitimate areas of study, whether investigated, critically, as objects of study (curriculum content) or used as methodological lenses within Religious Education (as proposed in the fictional character Debate-It-All Derek in Freathy et al.'s RE-searchers model, for instance.) The problem occurs, I have argued, when methodologies are promoted, exclusively, that is as the best lens to use when trying to understand the overall phenomenon of religion and the complexity (e.g. internal and external diversity) of individual traditions or if one methodological stance becomes so influential that it is used principally in RE – as opposed to temporarily as one element in a broader multi-methodological and interdisciplinary approach.

A similar differentiation can also be found in Strhan's article. The fact that students employ critical reasoning techniques (here: in relation to contemporary ethical issues) in Religious Education, she argues, is certainly not a negative development in itself. Portraying reason as a way of discovering 'ultimate truth' and exploring religions mainly through a focus on differing doctrinal truth claims, however, oversimplifies what it means to be religious for different people in different contexts and times. In such a case:

> 'The result is that students emerge from their religious education able to give a reasoned justification of whether or not there is a God, whether or not drugs should be legalised, whether or not women should be allowed abortion on demand, but with little awareness of

> the complex, rich and troubling histories and myths at the heart of religious traditions, and therefore a distorted picture of what "being religious" means.' (Strhan, 2010, 25)[67]

Even if unintended by critical realists, one risk this approach might therefore involve with regard to my focus on theological understanding(s) in RE is that students begin to see religious beliefs and doctrines as individual, unrelated pieces of evidence, only useful to them to back-up contrary religious viewpoints in philosophical/ethical debates. In this way, however, they are unlikely to learn much about the centrality of transcendence which arguably shapes both personal and communal experiences of religious believers around the globe. It goes without saying that such a potential lack of focus on 'transcendence' is particularly problematic with regard to the study of theistic religions. How – I have asked from the start of this study – is it possible to maintain that theistic religions are represented adequately and with a certain respect for their complex self-understandings in RE in schools without a religious affiliation if the very defining feature of theism, belief in God, is neither studied thoroughly nor systematically in these educational settings (e.g. as a result of the perceived disciplinary incompatibility that is thought to exist between Theology and non-confessional, multi-faith RE; see chapters 1, 3 and 5)?

This does not mean, of course, that (theistic) religion is disinterested in issues of truth – quite the contrary – but (as Strhan specifies) we should be open to the possibility that, more often than not, this truth might not be 'ultimate truth' in its abstract, impersonal sense, but *truth in relation to the human.* Drawing on Levinas's philosophical reflections on transcendence (1969, 1981, 1998), she thus suggests: rather than centring upon questions of absolute truth, religion is more concerned with 'transcendence in relationship with Man, and Man with the World', which, as a focal point in the study of religion(s), 'does *not* fall within the philosopher's totality' and, by definition, cannot be studied 'through critical evaluation of its truth or falsity' (Strhan, 2010, 35). To do justice to the centrality of transcendence in religious belief, one could therefore conclude, multi-faith RE should refrain from overusing teaching techniques that give students only very little insight into the relationships followers of different religions have with the transcendent. Up to this point in the argument, in other words, I agree with Strhan's views and intend to use the idea of the centrality of transcendence in the lives of believers as an interpretive lens for my existentially orientated, life-centred approach to theological content in RE. As we will see, however, the deeper we look into the philosophical reasoning behind this position, the more differentiation and modification will be required to secure success of this project. What exactly I mean by this will become evident if we continue to analyse Strhan's criticisms of Wright and identify, as a result, her own proposition for a 'religious education otherwise' (see article title: Strhan, 2010).

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[67] This also relates to the question of positionality, that is students' (and teachers') capacity to reflect upon their own position in relation to what and how they study (and teach) in RE. In this context, Strhan argues that, although examining truth claims helps students to some extent to engage critically with their own religious or non-religious backgrounds, 'there must be greater attention given to the situatedness of the critical reasoner', to the fact that they, too, 'stand within a certain epistemic community with its own assumptions' (Strhan, 2010, 30). This resonates with the argument I proposed in chapter 4 (section 4.1.3) that religious understanding should generally be viewed as a matter of complex personal and methodological positionality vis-à-vis religion(s) as well as the study of religions, in particular.

With regard to the former task, it is necessary to stress that there are different interpretations of critical realist RE of which some are certainly more sensitive to the significance of transcendence in religious belief than others, and Wright's more recent writings (see, for example, 2004) could be named as an example here. But Strhan replies to this observation: even though Wright's later work has been open to this Levinasian perspective on transcendence, his critical realist thinking still leads him to a preoccupation with difference and the differing truth claims of religious traditions in particular, which stands in conflict with the philosophy upon which he claims to have drawn. For example, Wright interprets Levinas's appeal to the 'centrality of goodness' in the lives of believers as a recognition of the space, distance or difference that exists between I and the Other and therefore claims that true morality lies not in a resolution of difference, but in its celebration (Wright, 2004, 50). He calls this 'Levinas's vision of humanity flourishing through its celebratory encounters with alterity, difference and otherness', realisable only through the virtue of 'receptivity' (Wright, 2004, 50). This is why he concludes that Religious Education, if it seeks to be truly transformative in nature, must 'insist on receptivity towards a range of alternative accounts of ultimate reality' and always regard the 'pursuit of ultimate truth' as its primary aim (Wright in Strhan, 2010, 227). As Strhan objects, however, this view of transcendence in the lives of believers reflects quite a misunderstanding of Levinas's writings on this subject and the light they may shed on the nature and purpose of Religious Education:

> 'This more nuanced version of critical reason provides a corrective to the excessive dominance of instrumental critical reasoning in Wright's earlier model. However, it is open to debate whether the main insight that we should draw from Levinas in relation to RE is this idea of a "celebration of difference and alterity". Whilst this balances earlier versions of critical realism that sought to bring all within the sphere of *my* understanding, the problem with emphasising this celebration of difference, and seeing goodness as the recognition of difference, is that it appears to neutralise the troubling nature of the confrontation with the

> Other, that Levinas emphasises, which is far from a celebration of difference.' (Strhan, 2010, 29, emphasis in the text)

This realisation is important to the task of this chapter (developing an interpretive framework for studying key theological concepts and teachings of different theistic religions, systematically and with the potential for 'careful comparison'[68]) for the following reason. It helps us to shift our focus away from a view of religion as being mainly concerned with issues of abstract doctrinal truth (or any other singular methodological concern) – and dealing with potential conflicts that differing truth claims may cause within and between religious systems – to a more practical, existentially orientated understanding of what it might mean to be religious *for religious believers* in their personal lives, both as individuals and as members of religious communities. With regard to adherents of theistic faith traditions, this idea of being religious can then be summarised as the complex spiritual experience (which includes such things as a cognitive and emotional sense of awareness, for instance) of standing in a meaningful relationship – and sometimes confrontation – with the transcendent (God, the divine) that affects and shapes the individual and communal life of the believer.

Yet, as should be clear from the argument I have developed so far, there would be no use in simply replacing one understanding of religion (regarded as a misunderstanding by some) with another understanding (most likely to be regarded as a misunderstanding by others). It is therefore my aim to use this important existential aspect not as the main or only lens through which to view (theistic) religions, but as an organising principle for my interpretive framework within which my earlier methodological propositions of a content-based view of theology will be embedded consistently. This means that respective conceptualisations of religion/being religious, underlying the different methodological focal points in my approach (philosophical, doctrinal, practical, existential) will also have to be integrated in such a way that a balanced and multi-faceted view of the nature of religion(s) becomes possible. To solve this challenging task, I will continue to enter into conversation with scholars of Religious Education who have recently contributed to this debate, focusing mainly on Strhan's own proposition for a 'religious education otherwise' (2010, 32-44) and, albeit more briefly, Copley's God-centred view of (Religious) Education and Gearon's idea of a 'holy ground' in RE (2014).

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[68] As explained in my introduction to this thesis, I use the term 'careful comparison' to point to the fact that such acts of comparison and differentiation should only take place in RE if the given methodological approach(es) is/are capable of balancing issues of universality and particularity in the study of religions. (For more information, see chapter 7.)

### 6.1.3 Strhan's 'Religious Education Otherwise': An Ethically Motivated Proposition for Transcendence-Orientated RE?

As explained above, Strhan's own proposition for a 'religious education otherwise', namely one which is sensitive to the centrality of transcendence in religious belief, is based on an interpretation of Levinas's concept of religion that differs from Wright's in one significant respect. Rather than seeing religion (and Religious Education, for that matter) as being concerned with ultimate truth, of which a glimpse might be discoverable through critical reasoning, Levinas stresses that religion is 'the very pulsation of life' in which God enters into a relationship with humankind and humankind with the world, which makes it 'simultaneously posterior and anterior to philosophy and reason' (Levinas, 1990, 189). Yet, what is important to realise about this view of transcendence is that the relationship it has with humans and humans have with transcendence should neither be construed as dialogical in nature, nor should it be based on the principles of equality and reciprocity. To understand this, we need to consider briefly Levinas's use of the concept of *illeity* in this context, which derives from the Latin demonstrative pronoun *ille, illa, illud* – 'that' in English – and could be said to describe things that are brought to our attention *at a distance* only. What *illeity* refers to, in other words, is the unbridgeable distance that exists between I and the Other, a distance that cannot be overcome without causing both concepts, the very I-ness and Other-ness of both sides of the encounter, to fall apart. For Strhan, this insight has two important consequences: first, God can never be thematised nor brought to presence in language (see Levinas, 1998, 78); and second, the otherness of the Other is always preserved in all our encounters with alterity because, in the face of *illeity*, 'neither I, nor my neighbour, nor the third party, can be reduced to essence or identity' (Strhan, 2010, 35). In this sense, Strhan summarises, *illeity* is what allows the word 'God' to be pronounced, free from attempts to thematise it, or as Levinas puts it: 'Illeity overflows both cognition and the enigma through which the Infinite leaves a trace in cognition' (Levinas, 1981, 162).

As I will show below, the concept of *illeity* (in connection with the view of being religious as standing in a meaningful relationship with the transcendent) is useful to the development of an existentially orientated, life-centred framework for furthering theological understanding(s) in RE that is compatible with the subject's non-confessional, multi-faith nature. My interpretation and use of this idea, however, differ to some extent from those proposed by Strhan. The reason for this is simple. Although Strhan, too, arrives at the conclusion that what Religious Education needs most, to do justice to the centrality of transcendence in the lives of believers, is a move 'more towards the approach of theology' (understood as a multi-disciplinary practice) (Strhan, 2010, 41), I see a few problematic elements and potential confusions in the particular Levinas-influenced understanding of theology on which she seems to base this suggestion. To be able to utilise these argumentative elements, linked to the idea of transcendence, in a non-confessional setting, I will explain, it is necessary to specify, more clearly than Strhan has done, *from which academic perspective* and *for which educational purpose* such a view of theology would be studied – and used as a method (if appropriate at all) – in multi-faith RE. As a next step, I will therefore present my understanding of Strhan's theology-centred approach and explain why I think choosing a slightly different focus in the philosophical framework underlying it would be more appropriate for RE in schools without a religious affiliation.

Explaining her view of theology, Strhan draws on a definition a Christian sixth-form student of hers once pronounced in a lesson focusing on Theology as a potential degree choice at university level. When asked about the meaning and nature of Theology, the student described the discipline as:

> 'the study of the transcendent and inarticulable *Good*, through examining how people from different religious traditions and faith communities have responded to and attempted to articulate this transcendent' (Strhan, 2010, 33, my emphasis).

The reason why I am emphasising this conceptualisation of the transcendent as 'Good' – or as one might perhaps specify in the context of theistic religion: 'Go(o)d'? – is because it reveals a particular *ethical* interpretation of theology, which I think is a problematic one to promote in the context of multi-faith RE. A closer look at Strhan's vision of RE reveals that. Here, she identifies this focus on the transcendent, inarticulable 'Good' as a view of theology – and of being religious, for that matter – that is 'ethical at its core' in the same way Levinas has in mind when he states: 'Ethics is not the corollary of the vision of God, it is that very vision (Levinas, 1990, 17, 36). In other words, this view of religion cannot be reduced to knowledge – God as *Ille* cannot be understood, let alone approached, conceptually ('Every comprehension of the transcendent leaves the transcendent outside', see Levinas, 1969, 293). Instead divinity, including the language of God, arises from the *ethical demand* we find in our own awareness of the responsibility we have for others (Strhan, 2010, 36, 41). Setting this in relation to Wright's different Levinasian interpretation of transcendence, Strhan claims:

> 'The magnitude of the ethical demand from which divinity emerges is rather more than any "celebratory encounter with alterity" (…) Towards the end of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes how subjectivity depends upon the "curvature of intersubjective space", in which the Other, higher than me, addresses me and looks for my response. This Levinas describes as "perhaps the very presence of God" (Levinas, 1969, 291).' (Strhan, 2010, 36)

This is why the critical realist appeal to the pursuit of *absolute* truth (or 'truth in its abstract, impersonal sense', as I termed it above) is so unhelpful to understanding what it means to be religious for religious believers, according to Strhan. Following Levinas's interpretation, she argues truth is necessarily always experienced as radically subjective, thereby refusing to be contained by conceptual thinking or rational argument. Truth is a reflection of the relationship that exists between humans and the transcendent, and at a very personal level, it is a 'matter of being called to account by the other and all the others' (Strhan, 2010, 38).

For these reasons, Sthran finally concludes that what the subject of RE needs most to be sensitive to the significance of transcendence in people's lives is a multi-disciplinary approach to theology of the sort that is usually taught in liberal universities, for example. Apart from Philosophy, this approach should draw on such disciplines as Literary, Historical, Sociological and Psychological Studies, but most importantly with much greater 'emphasis given to attentiveness to the *subjects of study'*, rather than just setting every belief or truth as an object of critique' (Strhan, 2010, 41, my emphasis). Drawing on Morgan's view (2007, 345) of Levinas, she adds in a final remark, this emphasis on the (human) subject's relationship with transcendence would then enable us to teach (in RE, I assume) 'a religion of humanity' that, rather than 'mystify[ing] the notion of the divine, realizes that the language of God arises for us when we are aware of our responsibility to others and of the demands of justice' (Strhan, 2010, 41). Understanding the centrality of transcendence in the lives of believers in this combined experiential/philosophical/ethical way, I would therefore summarise (to complete my interpretation of Strhan's reflections): a theological approach based on this view of transcendence could ultimately be defined as the study of the inarticulable Go(o)d and the ways people of different faiths have expressed their relationship with and responded to that – *Illi* – Go(o)d.

Yet, as indicated above, there are several problems involved in this view of theology that make it impossible to promote it, in this unmodified way, in multi-faith RE. Next, I will therefore analyse these problems with a view to suggesting ways for the development of an alternative transcendence-orientated approach, more suitable for this educational context.

### 6.1.4 Problems in Strhan's View of the Centrality of Transcendence in Religious Belief and Religious Education

One issue with Strhan's pedagogical stance is that the concept of a 'religion of humanity' could be accused of being too anthropocentric and 'this-worldly' to do justice to other understandings of religion, rooted in mystic religious experience or revelation, for instance. This raises the question to what extent Strhan's Levinasian view of theology coheres with the self-understandings of insiders of theistic belief and if it is at all realistic to find a view of religion, on which theological explorations in RE could be based, that reflects all possible aspects of what it might mean to be religious for people of different religious convictions. In response to this question, this study will argue that – even though such a criticism is an important one to raise in the context of theology – the choice of a believer- or life-centred view of theistic belief is nevertheless a necessary one to make in the development of an interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach to theological content such as mine. This, we will see, is particularly justifiable if the suggested (believer-focused) interpretive lens allows for in-depth explorations of a great diversity of different *ideas of the divine*, discoverable both in abstract philosophical concepts and the personal views expressed by individuals and religious communities worldwide. There are, however, more serious problems involved in Strhan's 'religious education otherwise' which need careful consideration.

The most serious shortcoming of Strhan's conception of theology, as I see it, is that it fails to clarify from which academic perspective and for which educational purpose it employs and possibly even advocates this Levinasian interpretation of transcendence as an appropriate focal point in the study of religions. As we have seen in the previous chapter (section 5.2.2), a crucial question to ask with regard to the issue of the various viewpoints from which theological approaches can be promoted is always: are they promoted, predominantly, as objects of study (that is curriculum content to explore), in which case their level of confessionalism might not matter so much – even in the context of RE in religiously unaffiliated schools? Or are they recommended, predominantly, as methods to use, in which case an underlying confessional motivation of such an approach, as found in the Protestant idea of spiritual 'nurture' and the Catholic notion of 'catechism', for instance, would arguably be acceptable only in those respective (denominational) faith school settings. However, it is important to stress here again (as I have already done in section 1.1) that even those viewpoints that are religiously non-specific – in the sense that they might neither originate from nor endorse the beliefs and teachings of a specific faith tradition or denomination, but presuppose *the existence of God* (rather than the significance of studying *the idea of God*) – can be evaluated as confessional and are hence, inadequate for the context of secular educational settings. In such a case, the confessionalism would lie in the act of confessing, implicitly, to the general theistic conviction that there is a God, irrespective of specific doctrinal interpretations and the truth claims made in individual religious traditions.

To illustrate what I mean by this, I need to explain the difference between an approach, sensitive to the centrality of transcendence in religious belief, which is confessional/inappropriate in this sense (for RE in schools without a religious affiliation) and one that is non-confessional/appropriate by examining a bit more closely, and with these considerations in mind, the Levinas-type definition of Theology the Christian student gave in Strhan's lesson. For me, this definition consists of two distinctly different components. The first part – Theology is 'the study of the transcendent and inarticulable Good' possesses a confessional, albeit more or less religiously non-specific, element in that it clearly identifies the transcendent (i.e. God), *not merely (and much less contestably) the idea of it*, as the object of study. This presupposes the existence of such a divine reality because otherwise, there would be nothing to study in the first place. One aim of engaging in such a type of theology, most likely pursued by adherents of a theistic faith such as Strhan's Christian student, could then be to (at least begin to) comprehend the transcendent – in short, understanding God, as opposed to understanding belief in God and beliefs about God. Moreover, the educational purpose of such a theological approach, as we have seen in the examples in chapter 5 (e.g. Chipperton et al., 2016), would be something along the lines of promoting students' personal spiritual development within a theistic faith tradition or worldview. However, such a confessional view of theology (I concluded), although theoretically adequate for non-confessional educational settings if seen as curriculum content to explore in RE, should not be used as a method in religiously unaffiliated schools because its viewpoint and purpose are incompatible with such values of multi-faith RE as impartiality and respect for a plurality of perspectives (here: atheism or agnosticism, for instance). The second part of the definition offered by Strhan's student, however, is unproblematic with regard to the question of compatibility with multi-faith RE, if it is disconnected from the first part, as the suggestion to examine how people from different religious traditions have attempted to articulate, and perhaps responded to, the transcendent is concerned with people's ideas of the divine, not the divine itself. Although the focus is still on the centrality of transcendence in religious belief, the turn to the study of people's beliefs, ideas and experiences of that which they identify as transcendent in their personal and communal religious lives – in other words, examining the subjects' views on their experiences of God, not God as a potential source of those experiences – leaves open the question of whether or not God exists and is therefore much more suitable for the context of non-confessional, multi-faith Religious Education in religiously unaffiliated schools.

Unfortunately, it is unclear where Strhan stands on this issue. On the one hand, she stresses the importance of developing 'an attitude of greater attentiveness' in RE towards the myriad ways in which 'religion is found in the lives of individuals and communities', and it is evident from her response to Critical Realism that the main aim of the theological approach she envisions would be to uncover how religious believers have responded to and expressed their relationships with the transcendent in various cultural contexts and times (Strhan, 2010, 41). In other words, to do justice to the significance of transcendence in religious belief, Religious Education should concentrate more on the subject experiencing a relationship with the Other and not so much on issues of abstract doctrinal truth and differing (e.g. philosophical) conceptualisations of God. This suggests an exploration of people's views of the divine, which can easily be done from a perspective that does not require any type of faith commitment on the part of the student, for example (as I have argued in section 5.2) by using a multitude of different methodologies including a range of theological and Religious Studies approaches (i.e. phenomenological, hermeneutical, experiential, critical realist, etc.). On the other hand, though, Strhan seems to endorse her student's Levinas-influenced view of Theology as being concerned with the study of the transcendent and inarticulable Good itself, namely *through examining the ways in which different religious believers have articulated that transcendent/Good.* It is the preposition 'through' in this definition of Theology that implies a different reason for exploring people's views of the divine than the one I suggested above. Rather than seeing the various relationships that different religious believers claim to have with the divine as valuable objects of study in their own right (which can be done in a variety of ways), this formulation instrumentalizes the study of people's views of the divine in that it assumes that exploring these perspectives is a *method* or *strategy* for reaching the different, and presumably 'higher', goal of studying the transcendent/Go(o)d itself. This is not just problematic in the context of RE because of the (religiously non-specific) confessional component of this definition, postulating that there is a divine reality discoverable in people's views of it, but also because it implies, however unintentionally perhaps, that Go(o)d – should he/she/it exist, is something that can be studied and hence approached intellectually in the first place, which contradicts the central idea of *illeity* – the irreducible otherness of the Other – in the study of theistic belief.

Strhan solves this latter problem, as it seems to me, by concentrating on the ethical core of her Levinasian view of transcendence as the Good which arises in our encounters with alterity as a result of our 'being called to account by the other' (Strhan, 2010, 38). It is an encounter, happening not at a cognitive level, by seeking conceptual comprehension of the transcendent, but in that 'inter-subjective space' Levinas describes, in which confrontation with the very otherness of the Other generates an awareness in us for the need of an ethical response to the world. Again, however, it is unclear if Strhan promotes this view of alterity, in the face of *illeity*, merely as a potential theistic perspective to explore in RE (e.g. in order to further students' appreciation of the significance of transcendence in the lives of believers), or if she advocates this ethically orientated theistic worldview as one to adopt by teachers and students in the subject. The latter project, which she seems to support to some extent at least, is of course problematic as it imposes not only a theistic worldview upon the students, but also identifies a particular ethical responsibility which is rooted in this view of transcendence:

> 'Indeed, as the OFSTED [2007] report tells us of the need to encourage respect for others, we might extend this to speak of the need to teach "a religion for adults" (Levinas, 1990, 11-21) in the sense that Levinas describes, a religion of humanity that […] "realizes that the language of God arises for us when we are aware of our responsibility to others and of the demands of justice" (Morgan, 2007, 345). *Indeed, it could be argued that teaching RE in the way that I am suggesting might itself be seen as the practice of this type of religiosity*' (Strhan, 2010, 41, my insertion and emphasis).

Here are my two main criticisms of this statement: first, identifying the promotion of respect for others as the main purpose for choosing and employing such an ethical/theological approach makes it difficult to see religious traditions and people's beliefs and practices as phenomena that are worth being studied in their own right – in the sense that they make up important aspects of the world that surrounds us, and a lack of awareness of them would, at the very least, lead to a low level of general knowledge (see also my non-absolutist definition of *religions as phenomena worthy to be studied in their own right* in section 4.2.2). Instead, it is implied that learning about religions is mainly a practical instrument used to further specific political goals such as social cohesion (see section 4.2.1).

And second, as already claimed above, advocating an approach that presupposes not only the significance of the idea of the transcendent, but also the reality of its existence, on which it bases as a consequence a particular ethical understanding of the world, is a move which cannot be reconciled with the non-confessional, multi-faith nature of RE. Hence, it becomes clear that it is *not* an option to use this interpretation of transcendence-orientated theology in RE in schools without a religious affiliation, without providing effective solutions to these areas of concern.

## 6.2 God-Centredness as an Interpretive Lens for Systematic, Interreligious Explorations of Theological Content

This section puts forward a modified version of transcendence-/God-centred theology that deliberately avoids the problems involved in Strhan's pedagogical stance and could thus be used in multi-faith RE without compatibility problems. For this, it will first present a believer-focused view of theistic faith, interpreted here as the experience of standing in a meaningful relationship with the divine (section 6.2.1); then, discuss the significance of critical distance from God as an object of study in non-confessional, multi-faith RE (section 6.2.2); and finally, propose four areas of God-centred investigation, concerned with believers' views and experiences of the divine, to use as an interpretive framework for interreligious theology in this particular educational context (6.2.3 and 6.2.4). This chapter will then end with a brief example of a potential practical application of this approach, using a combination of hermeneutical strategies and, more specifically, Scriptural Reasoning techniques for interreligious investigations of theological content in RE. (More detailed propositions for potential practical applications, including possible teaching strategies and resources for interreligious comparison are included in the appendices: see sections 9.1 and 9.2.)

### 6.2.1 Conceptualising Theistic Belief as Standing in a Meaningful Relationship with the Divine: A More Suitable Transcendence-Orientated Approach

To overcome the problems in Strhan's approach discovered above, I suggest shifting the focus in the development of a non-confessional, theology-centred approach that is sensitive to the centrality of transcendence in theistic belief completely onto the subjects experiencing a relationship with the divine, in other words: people's ideas, beliefs and experiences of God, gods or ultimate reality. This can be done by making the following modifications to Strhan's, otherwise useful, definition of a religiously non-specific theology. A transcendence-orientated, theology-centred approach, compatible with the values of non-confessional, multi-faith RE, is concerned with:

> *the study of the idea of the transcendent (understood as an umbrella term encompassing all notions of the divine or other forms of ultimate reality) as it has been articulated by adherents of different monotheistic and polytheistic traditions and worldviews in different cultural contexts and times, and of the meaningful relationships these believers express themselves to have with the transcendent in their personal and communal lives.*

This simple turn to the views of the religious believer (subject) makes it possible to foster awareness of the crucial role transcendence plays in the lives of affiliates of theistic traditions/worldviews, which adds an important existential focus to the study of theistic religions in schools, whilst also maintaining an entirely non-confessional perspective, adequate for the study of religions in secular educational settings.

As said in section 5.2.5, it is important to stress, again, that this view of theology should not be misunderstood as a grand narrative through the lens of which all religious phenomena are interpreted. This is because theistic belief is contextualised here as an important focal point among others in the study of religions, adopted temporarily, within a broader multi-methodological approach, and for the specific purpose of furthering theological understandings in religiously non-affiliated schools. So, students who engage in the study of people's ideas of the divine are not presented with an overarching account of what it means to have a theistic faith or worldview, but with an existentially orientated lens which allows them to explore a diversity of individual and communal theistic perspectives in various contexts. There might be an element of creating a questionable 'Big Idea' for RE (compare Wintersgill et al., 2017) by encouraging them to see the 'big picture' of theism – here construed around the idea of transcendence- or God-orientation – but, as I will show below, this conceptualisation can be justified on the grounds that belief in the divine, which undoubtedly involves such a God-orientation, is the defining feature of theism and hence, not an external (e.g. philosophical/sociological/psychological/ethical) construct imposed upon theistic traditions. Furthermore, as chapter 7 will reveal, such a '*mildly* essentialist' viewpoint (as I understand it) can be defended so long as the overall methodological approach proposed has the capacity to balance not just different conceptions of religion(s), but also questions of particularity and universality in the study of religion(s). First, however, it is important to clarify how exactly my conceptualisation of theology differs from Strhan's and what implications this has for RE.

In contrast to Strhan's suggestions, the particular *academic perspective* reflected in this modified definition is in line with the first principle of my interreligious, theologically orientated approach introduced in section 5.2.2 – the assertion that theology, to be suitable for RE in schools without a religious affiliation, should always define itself as a practice that does not presuppose faith in the divine on the part of the students and is applicable to all theistic religions. The *educational purpose* behind this view of theology also differs from the one considered above. While Strhan's focus is on the ethical value of using a theological approach to Religious Education (instilling in students a sense of responsibility towards others in the face of the greater, inarticulable Good studied in Theology), I continue to claim that a better (and less controversial) justification for the promotion of a stronger theological focus in RE can be found in the need for adequate representations of (theistic) religions in the classroom. Thus, I have argued in previous chapters that the lack of focus on God and theological curriculum content in RE, identified by many researchers as a result of what they see as the (continuous) 'marginalisation' of theology, leads to a questionable representation of theistic traditions, thereby diminishing students' chances of developing deep knowledge and understanding of them. (This argument was based on the foundational hypothesis formulated in section 1.5 of this study; compare also introduction to chapter 4).

To ensure these two points (academic perspective/educational purpose), however, it is also recommendable to speak of the study of the 'relationship people have, or express to have, with the transcendent' and not of 'the relationship the transcendent has with humankind', as Strhan does (following Levinas), as the latter might, again, be viewed as an indirect testimony to the reality of God's presence in the world, rather than simply an interest in people's self-identified experiences of it. This does not mean that people's relationships with God cannot be perceived and defined by them to be truly dialogical in nature, nor does this view of theology wish to deny the truthfulness of such encounters with the divine, e.g. by reducing them to purely psychological phenomena. The main purpose of choosing this believer- or life-centred formulation of theology is just to make sure that the ultimate question of the (un-)reality of God's existence remains open, and corresponding atheist or theist beliefs are neither the foundation, nor a constituent element in the construction of this theology-centred methodological approach because even a type of confessionalism as religiously non-specific as this one would still be inadequate for the context of RE in schools without a religious affiliation. (This position, which can be described as 'procedural agnosticism', will be further explored and justified below.)

### 6.2.2 RE and the Irreducible Otherness of the Other – Exploring *Ideas* of the Divine to Ensure Critical Distance from God as an Object of Study

One interesting outcome of choosing the concept of God-orientation, as found in the lives of theists, as an interpretive lens for the study of theistic religions in multi-faith RE is that it provides us with the opportunity to interpret *illeity* (Levinas's appeal to the irreducible otherness of the Other) in a new way, namely as an expectation that we should place on theological approaches, in this specific educational context, *to keep a critical distance from their main object of study: the divine*. In the case of the propositions I made above, this distance is achieved by shifting the focus from the study of God/the divine to the study of *ideas of God/the divine* and people's views of the relationship they have with that divine presence in their personal and communal lives.

I am aware that this argument for keeping a critical distance from God as an object of study in RE (precisely, by trying to understand people's *ideas and views of the divine*, rather than the divine itself) has the potential to polarise and is thus likely to receive critical responses voiced, for a variety of reasons, by RE researchers and practitioners of different theoretical and methodological convictions. Some, for example, will agree with the argument for maintaining a critical distance from the divine, but see this as proof that theology should have no place in non-confessional, multi-faith Religious Education as they cannot conceive of a God-centred approach, managing to not cross the line to confessional thinking, nor would they see any need for it in RE. Others, who would normally deny theology any place in multi-faith RE at all, might welcome my proposition of introducing a stronger believer-focused and hence, life-centred interreligious approach to theology, specifically designed for the study of religions in religiously unaffiliated schools, thus reconsidering, perhaps, some of their former aversions to theology in this context. On the contrary, proponents of confessional (e.g. Christian denominational) theological approaches might criticise that defining theology as the study of the meaningful relationships people express themselves to have with the transcendent takes the focus too far away from the students' own religious or non-religious experiences. From this perspective, it could then be claimed that students who come from a religious background and already have a theistic belief would not be offered sufficient room for personal spiritual development, inside or outside a specific faith tradition; and non-religious students would have little opportunity to reassess their outsider perspective on theistic belief, e.g. through direct contact with confessional theological practices such as prayer and worship in the classroom. I shall explain below, however, while some of these considerations are to some extent true, such potential limitations on the scope of the impact theology has on students' lives are necessary concessions to make if the goal is to provide a theology-centred approach, suitable for the study of religions in schools without a religious affiliation. Moreover, those who oppose, for theological reasons, the idea of remaining at a critical distance from God in the study of theism in schools might even detect a certain anthropocentrism, or 'delusion of grandeur' even, in my believer-focused formulation of theology as explorations of the relationship which believers have with the divine (as opposed to the relationship God has with humanity). They might argue, for instance, that it is somewhat inappropriate, if not blasphemous, to convey the message in Religious Education – even if it is just through one's methodological choice – that it is human beings who enter into a relationship with God (not vice versa) and should thus be the centre of any theological concern in the classroom. And finally, others might also demur that my argument for critical distance reflects a general rationalisation in Theology and Religious Studies that has sadly removed the sacred as an experienceable force in the school life of children.

We already considered one such example in the introduction to this study: Copley's (2005) *Indoctrination, Education and God.* His main argument was this: having been shaped by a several-decade-long phase of 'secular indoctrination', modern British educational practice, including RE practice, now tends to ignore institutional religion and does not take personal belief seriously, thereby depriving students of important opportunities to consider the 'possibility of God' in their lives, which I interpreted to mean: the possibility of God's existence (Copley, 2005, 139). To avoid this, he concluded that RE should promote a 'world-religions-plus-spiritualities' approach which takes God (not just the idea of God, I assumed) seriously by giving students 'the freedom to discuss and question' religion, whilst also 'nurturing' them in the heritage religion of British culture, Christianity (Copley, 2005, 138-139). However, I rejected the confessional aspect of spiritual nurture in Copley's proposition (which, in this case, is even a religiously quite specific one, giving Christian theistic belief precedence over other views of the divine) on the grounds that this presupposes the certainty of God's existence and does not make room for a plurality of perspectives, including atheist and agnostic ones. This was evident in his assumption that RE should not train students to reduce God 'to an optional cerebral "idea"' because experiencing God's presence is necessary for their physical and intellectual survival (see Copley, 2005, 139) – a claim which collides with RE's need for being impartial and tolerant of different religious and non-religious perspectives.

Let us consider another, more recent, proposal of what could be seen as a God- or transcendence-centred approach, unwilling to keep a distance from its objects(s) of study. This will illustrate why such an attitude inevitably leads to compatibility problems with the values of non-confessional, multi-faith RE, thereby hindering – rather than contributing to – the project of (re-)introducing related (e.g. theological) curriculum content in non-faith school settings. Interestingly, this example can be found in Liam Gearon's *On Holy Ground: The Theory and Practice of Religious Education* (2014), despite the fact that the author himself does not consider the educational propositions he makes to be linked to the field of Theology. As my evaluation will show, however, it makes sense to include Gearon's approach in my examples of transcendence-orientated conceptualisations of learning and teaching in RE which automatically have a theological dimension and concern if applied to the study of theistic religions. This is also because my definition of theology as a non-confessional practice, concerned with the study of key concepts and teachings relating to God/the divine, is much broader than traditional confessional understandings of the discipline and would therefore include a view of Religious Education such as the one expressed in *On Holy Ground.*

According to Gearon, modern Religious Education does not make sufficient room for 'the holy' – not just as an idea to explore, but as an experienceable presence in life (Gearon, 2014, 149). Like Copley's 'possibility of God', I interpret this term to include, if not centre upon, the divine or transcendent (as defined in this thesis) because Gearon makes it clear, at the beginning of the book, that he has drawn on Rudolf Otto's concept of the numinous and specifically the argument that religious experience (of the numinous) has an irreducible, *sui generis* essence (Gearon, 2014, 7-8). Summarising Otto, he writes:

> 'The holy is *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the *mysterium* is wholly other, while the *tremendum* evokes awe, fear, terror, and the *fascinans* attraction, love. Identifying religious experience as the ground of religion itself, Otto identifies this experience as the "numinous", from the Latin *numen*. For Otto, understanding the holy is integral to understanding religion, it is its ground, that component of religion which is its ground, its fundamental experience, which is "irreducible to any other" (Otto, 1950, 7).' (Gearon, 2014, 7)

'The holy', in other words, is viewed here as an interpretive category, characterised both by its irreducibility to other experiential phenomena as well as its ineffability, e.g. the fact that its mysterious nature can never be fully captured in language or understood solely on rational grounds. This, however, Gearon argues, poses a serious problem for non-confessional Religious Education. The disciplinary frameworks on which the subject has drawn in the past decades – Philosophy, (liberal Christian) Theology, Social Sciences, Psychology, Phenomenology, etc. – are based on post-Enlightenment forms of knowledge which reject revelation as an epistemological ground; often 'have their origins in the critique of religion'; and seek to understand – without much success, Gearon believes – the numinous through a 'multitude of rationalisations' (e.g. emphasising reason, autonomy, freedom of belief and thought) (Gearon, 2014, 4, 8-9). He calls this an 'appropriation' of disciplines and intellectual traditions within Religious Education all of which reject the holy as a form of knowledge, if not as an orientation in life, and therefore cannot lead to true understanding of what it means to be religious (Gearon, 2014, 149). His main criticism, as I see it, is therefore that, due to this bias to rationalisation in modern RE, the subject presumes a critical distance from its most important object of study (the holy), which is harmful to the subject and its students as it forecloses, as a matter of principle, any 'lived engagement' with that presence (Gearon, 2014, 152). This distance is visible, for example, in the fact that the focus has shifted away from experience of the holy itself, to the rational study of the *idea* of the holy (Gearon, 2014, 150-151). For Gearon, this has significant ethical implications:

> 'An epistemological problem soon becomes therefore a moral one; put simply, a matter of choice in how to lead one's life. The critical distance between the holy and the idea of the holy soon becomes a moral and existential distance from the holy life, between the learned and the holy life.' (Gearon, 2014, 164).

There are several problems involved in the argument Gearon makes in *On Holy Ground*, some of which are not directly relevant to the research focus of this study, such as the questionable assumption that all the disciplinary frameworks considered by him completely reject the holy as a form of knowledge and orientation in life. With regard to this issue, it has been pointed out, for instance, that Gearon's presentation of the theoretical developments in RE (since the phenomenological revolution of the 1970s) fails to distinguish not only between potential non-religious and anti-religious epistemological grounds of those disciplines (Freathy, 2015, 112), but also between their secularist origins and subsequent processes of internal disciplinary diversification (Jackson, 2015, 76).

Yet, to stay on topic, I will not go into detail here and concentrate mainly on the issue of critical distance instead, with the intention of showing why Gearon's argument – if we consider it, in turn, as a possible objection to my proposition above – can and must be refuted. For this, I would make four points. The first reason why it is not only a possibility, but also a necessity to refute his argument for an elimination of critical distance from the holy/divine as an object of study in RE is this: as with many of the other God-centred approaches discussed above, it is *possible* to criticise Gearon's argument on the grounds that the act of (re-)introducing such a confessionally driven approach to multi-faith RE (seeking 'lived engagement' with the holy), even if it is religiously non-specific (i.e. not coming from or promoting a particular faith tradition), cannot be reconciled with the subject's need for impartiality and is therefore inadequate for the context of schools without a religious affiliation. However, what makes it also *necessary* to reject such a move, in my opinion – especially if the aim is to further theological understanding(s) in RE – is that allowing confessional thinking to be the driving force of methodology would have the opposite effect of what was probably intended in such a case. Thus, one could speculate, for example, that any large-scale attempt to ground RE in the 'life of the holy', understood as a single ground on which learning takes place, would ultimately lead to more, rather than less, opposition among critics of confessional (e.g. theological) RE, thus decreasing the chances of promoting in RE classrooms a stronger focus on that which is perceived as holy/transcendent/divine in the lives of believers.

This leads us to the second point. Rejecting the 'appropriation' of other disciplines and their methodological approaches to exploring religious belief, Gearon assumes there is one, best lens to use instead for the study of *all subject content* in Religious Education, namely the lens of the holy. However, as I have argued before (see sections 3.3, 3.4, 4.1.2, 5.1.1, 5.2.2), the search for a single (i.e. epistemological/methodological/theoretical) ground in multi-faith RE is highly problematic in itself, and especially so when the aim is to make the subject more transcendence- or God-focused. What makes this search so contentious is that it not only assumes that all phenomena of all dimensions of religion can ultimately be understood in a manner determined by one single part, such as the holy, the sacred, God, ultimate reality, etc., but also that that single part is the essence of religion, which makes all other lenses less useful to the quest for religious understanding. Again, adopting such a view in non-confessional, multi-faith Religious Education is not recommendable. With regard to Chipperton, Georgiou and Wright's article on theological literacy in RE (2016), for example, I therefore concluded in chapter 5 (section 5.1.1) that it is fundamentally impossible to select adequate criteria to decide what lies at the heart of religion in the study of religions in schools without a religious affiliation. In such non-confessional contexts, there is no basis to claim that it is God, let alone God, exclusively. And similarly, it would be unreasonable to claim that studying other aspects of religions through other (e.g. *non*-God-centred) methods would lead to *less* depth (as opposed to simply a *different* kind of depth) in learning. Hence, I proposed in my principles for constructing an interreligious version of theology suitable for non-faith school settings (see section 5.2.2) that multi-faith RE should, by definition, be seen as an epistemologically heterogenous field of study, requiring interdisciplinary/multi-methodological solutions to the task of furthering students' literacy in relation to the religions and worldviews studied in it.

These realisations lead us to point three in my criticisms of Gearon's suggestion. His identification of a single ground in Religious Education, found in the holy, is particularly problematic since it is based on a concept of what it means to be religious that ascribes a *sui generis* and hence, irreducible essence to religious experience, knowable only through direct engagement with the numinous. From this, one could draw the conclusion that 'true' understanding of religion(s) – whatever that would entail in this context – can only be reached by those who already have faith, thus seeing themselves, for example, as people who stand in a meaningful relationship with the holy/divine, or are at least open to the possibility of such a religious or spiritual encounter. On the contrary, students coming from non-religious backgrounds and approaching the study of religion(s) from agnostic or atheist viewpoints, perhaps, would be excluded from this type of religious-insider, experience-based learning. This reveals that Gearon's idea of a single 'holy ground' for RE – as all-encompassing as this term may sound – is highly exclusive as it can be accessed only by those who not only believe in the existence of some higher, absolute reality (as was the case with Copley's God-centred approach), but also have first-hand experience of it in their own lives. As we have seen in my refutation of Hirst's argument that religious understanding is a unique epistemological type requiring religious belief (section 4.1) however, binary insider/outsider distinctions are rather unhelpful categorisations in the study of religions as they ignore the fluidity and non-static nature of the terms 'insiders' and 'outsiders' of belief. The conclusion I drew in section 4.1.3 was that there is a necessary plurality of perspectives to be found in Religious Education, applying to both students' personal views on religion(s), that is the subjects who study religion(s), as well as the methods through which the curriculum content is explored. With regard to potential limitations of students' understandings of theistic belief, I therefore argued: although it is possible to claim that those who do not have a relationship with the divine may be unable to understand this existential/experiential dimension of theistic belief *in the same way* as those who have a theistic faith, this does not really matter for our discussion in the end because *identification with such a religious perspective* is neither the aim nor a prerequisite for (deep) learning in RE. In other words, the mere fact that so called 'outsiders' of a religious or spiritual worldview might comprehend the meaning of theistic belief differently from those who believe in the divine – e.g. without basing their understanding on personal experiences of God – does not make this type of comprehension less deep or valuable.

Gearon's vision of a Religious Education grounded in the 'life of the holy', however, clearly fails to refrain from such value judgements (see also my argument for a biaxial view of religious understanding, developed in section 4.1.3).

And finally, my fourth point is concerned with a particular intention I suppose drives proponents of confessional God-centred approaches, regardless of whether the methodological view they adopt is religiously specific/denominational such as Chipperton et al's (Church of England), partially specific such as Copley's (theism with a special focus on Christianity) or religiously non-specific such as Gearon's (although, even in this case, it is arguable that the chosen terminology, 'holiness', reflects a Western Christian way of dividing the world into sacred and profane, and almost all the examples used come from Catholic Christianity). To be precise, I would like to raise awareness of what I think is a common misapprehension informing the development of such God- or transcendence-orientated methodologies. All the pedagogical stances considered above seem to reject the idea of keeping a critical distance from God as an object of study on the grounds that such a methodological choice would prevent students from experiencing theistic belief in the classroom and discovering it as a potential mode of living, perhaps. If this is true, it would be reasonable to claim that proponents of such approaches are at least partially motivated by the concern that RE would otherwise lose its capacity for spiritual nurture of a particular kind, either in the context of a specific faith tradition or in theistic belief in general. Yet, what they fail to take into account in making these assumptions is that there is a significant difference between:

- *Ensuring that the subject of RE keeps a critical distance from God as an object of study*, *at a theoretical/methodological level* – e.g. by using a methodology that focuses on ideas of the divine in RE, not the divine itself (as I suggest in this study); and:
- *Ensuring that RE students keep a distance from God himself as a (potentially) experienceable presence in life, at a practical, personal level* – e.g. while studying theistic beliefs in the ways described above, if they already have or are in the process of developing faith in the divine (which is not at all a requirement of the non-confessional approach to theology promoted here).

What this distinction reveals is that, even within a non-confessional theological methodology (such as mine) that concentrates on views and ideas of the divine to maintain the necessary critical distance required in RE, it is still possible for students *who have a theistic* *faith* to approach their study of these views and ideas from a personal faith perspective that ultimately may (or may not) seek understanding of God himself. This is because the requirement of non-faith commitment discussed above (see section 5.2.1) applies only to the level of methodological construction of a given approach – in other words: to be able to use it, students must not be *expected* to believe in the divine. But this does not mean that those who already have such a theistic belief or worldview cannot, at a personal level, approach the study of different views of the divine through the eyes of a believer. (At the same time, it can be added, of course, non-religious students are given the opportunity to explore the same theistic views and ideas from a completely secular perspective, without being expected or even encouraged, to re-think their non-believing position.)

In other words, exploring theistic belief(s), methodologically, from a critical distance (here: by investigating people's views of the divine in different theistic religions, rather than trying to understand the divine itself and approaching this endeavour from a theistic faith perspective) does not deny learners the chance of approaching their explorations of theistic religions from a personal theistic viewpoint *if they so wish*. However, what it does *not* do and *should not* do (for reasons of incompatibility with the values of non-confessional multi-faith RE) is promote faith in the divine, implicitly or explicitly, by assuming the divine exists (and has relevance to students' lives), thereby impinging on students' rights to freedom of belief, or consciously discriminate against those who adopt non-theistic positions. Whether methodological approaches used in RE offer space for faith and non-faith perspectives in the classroom and whether they are, themselves, founded upon a faith position in their theoretical construction (in which case, they would most likely also reflect a religious motivation) are two different questions which need careful consideration. My argument is that God-centred approaches, to meet the requirements of non-confessional, multi-faith RE, must keep a critical distance from the divine as an object of study, whilst offering students enough room to cultivate whichever personal perspective (i.e. religious or non-religious) they wish and irrespective of how close to or distant from God – be it as a (potential) presence in the world or idea/concept to explore – they may choose or come to be at a personal level. Therefore, the interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach to theological content which I propose in this study – that is its methodological construction – is founded upon an agnostic worldview (chosen for the particular purpose of making it suitable for religiously unaffiliated schools), but it also allows students to approach the theistic views and theological content they thus encounter from any personal perspective they wish, including theist, agnostic and atheist ones, without placing value judgments upon any of them.

I need to clarify, though, that, by using the term ‘agnosticism’ in the context of methodology, I am not referring to what is sometimes called ‘ideological agnosticism’, but to ‘procedural agnosticism’, instead. This means I acknowledge there is no such thing as a completely neutral standpoint from which to approach religion(s) or any other subject matter and that it would be misleading to say that my theologically orientated approach is free from any ideological assumptions. Given the particular context in which theistic religions are studied here – in religiously unaffiliated schools in a liberal democratic society, I see it as a requirement for theology-centred RE to be tolerant of a plurality of religious and non-religious perspectives and impartial regarding ontological questions such as whether or not God exists. So, by saying that theological approaches to multi-faith RE must be ‘procedurally agnostic’, I mean that they need to be impartial vis-à-vis belief or disbelief in God. Larkin, R. Freathy, Doney, and G. Freathy (2019) have recently put it as follows:

> ‘To uphold the liberal principle and human right of freedom of religion and belief, the curriculum and pedagogy of RE in such schools [without a religious affiliation] must not be predicated upon any particular religious or non-religious worldview, philosophy or ideology or arguably any single conceptual, theoretical, interpretive or methodological framework. These all rest on fundamental assumptions about the nature of reality and what can be known about it and how. Inclusive multi-faith RE needs to adopt a *procedural agnosticism* regarding such claims, a plurality of foundational frameworks and perspectives and a self-conscious and self-critical orientation regarding the assumptions underpinning its aims, methods and selected content.’ (Larkin, R. Freathy, Doney, & G. Freathy, 2019, 2, my insertion and emphasis)

In other words, the procedural agnosticism referred to here is based on a certain ideological position, namely that of Western liberal democracy, which includes fundamental values such as liberty (i.e. freedom of belief and religion), equality and justice. Others might object to this view of RE, claiming instead that, precisely because the subject cannot attain complete ideological impartiality, no fair criticism can ever be made on any specific ideology underlying RE – regardless of how controversial it may be. This, they might argue, is because there is no neutral standpoint or ideology-free mechanism for evaluating individual ideological bases, and so, all possible positions will ultimately have to be considered equally valid. I reject this argument, however, for a simple reason. As indicated above, to decide which ideological frameworks might or might not be adequate for learning and teaching in RE, one has to look at the specific context in which these activities take place. In the case of British multi-faith RE, it is arguable then, a (post-)liberal, democratic –

that is *human-rights*-based – ideological position, e.g. maintaining impartiality vis-á-vis certain ontological questions – is more legitimate than a traditional (Christian) confessional one, for instance, because it is capable of protecting the rights of both those who want to follow (and perhaps, promote) a God-centred worldview and those who do not (compare Moulin, 2009[69]).

Yet, one more criticism against my interreligious vision of theology that might still come from those who would rather support the case for confessional (i.e. faith requiring/nurturing) theology in multi-faith RE is that the transcendence-orientated, interreligious vision of theology I promote, due to its special focus on theological content (i.e. key theological concepts and teachings of different religions; see chapter 5) and believers' views of the divine, was clearly designed with 'outsiders' of religion in mind, thus suiting them much better than adherents of a theistic belief. Following this line of thinking, one could object that students with a theistic belief – comprehending their own faith tradition mainly through 'self-involvement' (see Ford, 2013) – will sometimes be neither interested nor able to gain comparable understandings of other religions, which would make it less important whether the non-confessional methodology used is a God-centred one or not. It can be replied, however, that this point is equally relevant to 'outsiders' of theistic belief because, as we saw in chapter 4, we are all outsiders to some religion(s) and might therefore have difficulty grasping insider views of religion that are unfamiliar to us. But to refute the specific objection that the approach I propose is not very useful to those who come from theistic faith traditions, I will continue to focus on this group of students for the rest of this section.

Responding to the aforementioned assumption that being religious is a life-embracing commitment, understandable only from within a faith system, Ford points out, that it is possible for religious adherents to combine and enrich their 'understanding through self-involvement' with different types of understandings of their own and other religions, even to the point where one could speak of religious 'multilingualism' (Ford, 2013, 45).

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[69] Moulin argues that teachers can construct a just pedagogy of Religious Education, which is truly liberal in its assumptions, by asking their pupils to enter, hypothetically, into a social contract of the sort promoted by Rawls (Moulin, 2009, 153) (Rawls, 1971, 1993). In contrast to what Barnes's and Wright's critical realist approaches to RE demand, for example, this liberalism does not seek truth, but rather a '*modus vivendi* or "way of living"' that accommodates incompatible values (Moulin, 2009, 156). The contract is conceived in terms of an 'original position' where pupils take on a 'veil of ignorance' in that they pretend not to know, before entering the agreement, the religious or non-religious positions which they may later take in the classroom (Moulin, 2009, 157). Thus, Moulin argues, pupils will quickly realise that a liberalist contract, allowing for freedom of expression and belief, is the best ethical framework to choose in religiously diverse settings.

> 'The dilemma is obvious: if you stay outside any tradition of affirming God, then you run the risk of being superficial about all of them; but if you get involved in one of them, you rule out the possibility of a comparable understanding of any other. This is because each major faith tradition is a radical, life-embracing commitment. It is a whole of life which is not just about beliefs and truth claims (…) Yet, it is possible to try to become more nearly "bilingual" or even "multilingual" through study, collaboration, and friendship across boundaries separating the religions and worldviews. Theology and the associated study of religions are a crucial part of this. In dealing with the question of God or the divine, theology is trying to wrestle intelligently with what is the most significant reality for billions of people'. (Ford, 2013, 45-46)

The practice of promoting believing students' religious multilingualism would be perfectly feasible in RE, if one were to adopt the interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach I describe. Those who come from a 'God-affirming' tradition could become literate in relation to different theistic traditions in the same way non-theists can, without having to suspend their own beliefs or strive for identical (e.g. commitment-based) types of understanding(s) in relation to other religions. It is even likely that the process of getting to know belief systems other than their own – and varying views of the divine in particular – will enrich their personal faith experience, by broadening their religious vocabulary and helping them become fluent in more than one theistic language. It should be evident then that my theology-centred approach, despite the fact that it chooses to keep a critical distance from God at a methodological basis, does not prevent students who hold theistic beliefs to approach the study of their own tradition from a personal, God-seeking viewpoint or to explore other theistic religions through that same lens.

In fact, from the perspective of a believer in God, the act of remaining at a critical distance from the divine as an object of study in multi-faith RE (by studying *ideas* of the divine) could even be viewed positively – as a means to preserve the irreducible otherness of the Other (*illeity*), thus reflecting, methodologically at least, a certain respect for that which might be beyond human comprehension. Rather than seeing this move as a sign of inappropriate human grandeur (as briefly considered in my list of potential reactions at the start of this section), my life-centred definition of a theology, concentrating, specifically, on the relationship believers have with the divine (not on the divine itself), could also be interpreted as a way of honouring the ultimate incomprehensibility and ineffability of the Other in Religious Education. As we saw in chapter 5, my theology-centred approach thus provides a middle way between common extremes (here: theology-opposing versus theology-embracing pedagogical stances) in that it manages not to overstep the line to confessionalism (whether actively, by requiring/promoting/nurturing faith or passively, by simply confessing it) inadequate for schools without a religious affiliation on the one side, or to militant neutralism (or an abrogation of it), leaving students no room to express personal theistic beliefs and to explore the subject of religion from a faith-seeking position.

This also has the advantage that the pursuit of understanding the idea of God, conceptually and/or through doctrinal exploration, is no longer presumptuous or doomed to failure as Levinas warns when he states that 'every comprehension of transcendence leaves the transcendent outside'; that 'the transcendent is what cannot be encompassed'; and that 'this is an essential precision of the notion of transcendence, utilizing no theological notion' (Levinas, 1969, 293). This may be true if we think of theology as faith seeking understanding and even more so, if the intentional object of that understanding is supposed to be the transcendent itself. In the context of non-confessional theology in multi-faith Religious Education, however, where the decision to strive for comprehension(s) of the idea of God, as opposed to God himself, is justifiable and, in fact, *necessary* (as I have just argued), 'leaving the transcendent outside' has an important educational purpose. If it is not comprehension of God, but comprehension of people's ideas of God that lies at the heart of students' encounter with theology in RE, there is no theological/philosophical/ethical, etc. problem involved in the choice of concepts and teachings as valuable resources for learning. The main conclusion to be drawn from these considerations, with regard to the potential (in-)appropriateness of theology in non-confessional, multi-faith RE, is therefore: if defined, conceptualised and employed in the right way, namely as *a non-confessional practice, applicable to all theistic religions, that keeps a critical distance from God as an object of study by focusing on people's views of the divine (and the relationships they express themselves to have with the divine)*, theology can be an important resource for exploring the centrality of transcendence within the lives of believers in the specific context of schools without a religious affiliation.

Having identified the centrality of transcendence in religious belief as an interpretive lens to use in the type of interreligious theology I promote, I will now – in the final two sections of this chapter – begin to dive deeper into the question of systematisation by presenting a few preliminary ideas of how such an interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach could be applied to the study of theological concepts and teachings (see section 6.2.4). For this, I will develop this lens further into an existentially orientated (interpretive) framework for systematic explorations of such theological content, structured around the organising principle of God-centredness, and also provide one practical example of a teaching strategy, based on the principles of Scriptural Reasoning. As we will see, some of the suggestions made in this process have what could be termed a 'hermeneutical dimension' in that they seek to explore theological content, for example, through conceptually focused interpretations of a wide range of media including scriptural sources or in that they interpret and compare theistic beliefs through the method of interfaith scripture study – as is the case in the Scriptural Reasoning example. Before providing such specific propositions for a possible practical application of my combined content-based/life-centred approach to interreligious theology, I will therefore include, in the next section, a brief consideration of what it means to adopt a hermeneutical approach to teaching and learning in RE (as defined by key theorists/researchers in this area of investigation) and also explain how my own practical suggestions relate to these considerations.

### 6.2.3 Encountering, Interpreting and Reflecting on Different Views of the Divine – A 'Hermeneutical' Endeavour?

In order to clarify what is meant by hermeneutics or 'the art of interpretation' in the context of RE, both generally and with regard to this specific transcendence-orientated approach to theology, I will first revisit the main hermeneutical approaches already discussed in previous chapters and then, consider additional sources and arguments pertaining to adopting a hermeneutical perspective on learning and teaching in RE that have recently been proposed by researchers in this debate. This will bring out more clearly how the complex relationship between text, author and reader (here: student) (but also object of study, student, teacher and method) are understood in the context of different hermeneutical approaches, which will also enable me to demonstrate how my own practical suggestions relate to these major contributions to research on the topic. So far in this thesis, four main approaches that possess a hermeneutical dimension have been critically discussed, and to some extent evaluated (with regard to the question of potential incompatibilities between theology and non-confessional, multi-faith RE).

The first one was Cooling's concept-cracking strategy (Cooling, 1994b) discussed in chapter 3, section 3.2. As we have seen, the main reason why the process of concept-cracking can be viewed as having a hermeneutical dimension is found in the strategy's strong focus on the hermeneut's (here student's) horizon – or world of (prior, present and past) experience – and the ways in which that which is studied (e.g. a religious concept) relates and/or has relevance to the learner's everyday experiences. The process of concept-cracking consists of four steps designed to help teachers (i) to *unpack* central beliefs and/or concepts in a given (e.g. Bible) story, thereby identifying the focus of a unit of work; (ii) to *select* one belief and/or concept to explore with their students; (iii) to *relate* the belief/concept to the learners' everyday experiences; and (iv) to (re-)introduce the religious idea/concept explored in the unit of work with a view to making it *relevant* to the learners' life worlds thus possibly effecting what Gadamer refers to as a 'fusion of horizons' – here between the text and the learner (see Gadamer, 2004).

The second example of a hermeneutical approach to RE discussed in this thesis (see section 3.2) was the Church of England Office's recent Understanding Christianity project (2017). Here the main focus was on Pett and Cooling's (2018) development of Thiselton's idea of responsible hermeneutics (2009). Thiselton's work draws, in turn, from academic scholarship of philosophical hermeneutics pursuing the following two broad questions: how people interpret the world around them and how those interpretations affect their thoughts, beliefs, values and actions (see, for example, Gadamer, 1986, 1991, 2004 and Heidegger, 1962, 1984, 2011). According to Pett and Cooling, the most crucial point to make about Thiselton's hermeneutics of responsibility in the context of learning and teaching in RE is that it supports a view of the readers (or learners) as insiders of a given hermeneutical investigation in that they approach each individual text with certain pre-understandings (or in Heidegger's words: 'fore-structures', 1962) on the basis of which a 'fuller understanding' of the issue at stake in the learning situation, e.g. core Christian ideas and beliefs, can then be achieved (Pett & Cooling, 2018, 260). In particular, it was stated that Thiselton's concepts of 'hermeneutics of retrieval' and 'hermeneutics of suspicion' balance the two horizons of the text and the reader (learner) by exploring the meaning of the text through critical study of its background, language and symbols, etc. as well as the author's pre-understandings, whilst also examining the reader's preconceptions and contexts and the ways in which these shape the process of interpretation and meaning-making (Thiselton, 2009, 19). This (so Pett and Cooling conclude) enables learners of RE to be both insiders and outsiders in the hermeneutical process as they come to understand core Christian ideas and ways of living *in response* to their own worldviews whilst also retaining their integrity as learners within a secular society (Pett & Cooling, 2018, 264).

Third, as discussed in section 3.4, Reed and Freathy's The Art of Bible Reading Project (Freathy et al., 2014; Reed et al., 2013) has a hermeneutical dimension in that it uses a combination of interpretive methods from Narrative Theology and Narrative Philosophy in a way that helps students discover the Bible as a collection of stories expressing divine revelations through human history, and to see Christian communities as the *living stories* in which Biblical narratives are interpreted, both from communal and personal perspectives. Here, too, an important aim is to help students to become aware of the preconceptions and biases that influence not only their interpretation of the narratives of life collected in the Bible, but also the authors' own preconceptions of these narratives and the wider contextual factors that contribute to such prior understandings (see also Briggs, 2010, 2013a, 2013b; Jauss, 1982b, 1982a; Thiselton, 1990; Vanhoozer, 1990, 1998). In this case, students explore the narrative dimension of religion in four phases. At first, they *encounter* a particular Bible story through reading and/or listening to it to then (re-)consider it through the lens of an artwork (here: painting), which is the first stage of sense-making for them. Second, they *interpret* the narrative, again through the use of multiple media including visual art, thus exploring that which has been encountered in the first phase through the eyes of a narrative self (here: the artist). In the third phase, students begin to *understand* the narrative in community contexts, investigating for instance the question of how this Biblical narrative is interpreted in Christian communities. Employing the skills of empathy and imagination, they thus develop an idea of the significance of that narrative for Christians and from the perspective of the Christian tradition. In the fourth and final phase, they *reflect* on the narratives of self and others which raises questions of insider and outsider perspectives on Christian narratives and encourages students to explore their own position to that which is investigated and interpreted by them, including the (worldview) tradition(s) in which they themselves stand (Reed et al., 2013, 303-307).

And finally, as we saw in sections 3.5 and 5.2.2 of this thesis, hermeneutical considerations are also central to Freathy and Freathy's multi-methodological RE-searchers approach to RE (Freathy et al., 2015; R. Freathy & G. Freathy, 2013b). Apart from the fact that Narrative Theology – as described above – is itself one of the methodological lenses incorporated in the fictional characters (i.e. See-The-Story Suzie), there are also broader hermeneutical concerns underlying this view of a critical, dialogical (multi-methodological) approach to RE. In this case, special attention was given to Stern's (2013) argument for a balanced and flexible use of a 'hermeneutics of trust' and a 'hermeneutics of doubt' in Religious Education, allowing student researchers to step in and out of a wide range of methodological roles and engage with a number of insider and outsider perspectives of faith, including their own. Thus, students may learn that research always approaches religious phenomena from a unique methodological starting point, defined by the researcher's own (e.g. personal/academic) horizon, which makes it impossible to achieve complete academic objectivity, just as one cannot provide a perfect account of the believer's subjectivity through the methods of research. It is therefore important that students become aware of 'who they are' as researchers (e.g. their place, era, culture, experiences) and how that identity affects – and sometimes determines – what they will come to know and understand about religion(s) (R. Freathy & G. Freathy, 2013a, 162; compare Freathy & John, 2019a).

However, with regard to the main focus of the present study – the problem of perceived disciplinary irreconcilability between theology-centred approaches to learning and non-confessional, multi-faith RE – I have argued that most of these propositions might be too Christian-centred, either by focusing in particular on Biblical interpretation and/or Christian theological concepts (Concept Cracking, Understanding Christianity, The Art of Bible Reading) or – if claiming to be applicable to other religions (Narrative Theology, more broadly) – still rooted in Christian theological and/or Western philosophical thought, which might not always be an appropriate methodological starting point for the study of non-Christian and even more so, perhaps, non-Abrahamic traditions (see sections 3.2, 3.3 and 3.6 for a more detailed discussion of these issues). The same applies, one might argue, to other hermeneutical approaches, recently proposed for the context of Religious Education, such as Bowie's practice guide 'Opening the Door to Hermeneutical RE', (Bowie, Panjwani, Carswell, & Clemmey, 2020). Due to its strong focus on scriptural interpretation, this practice guide arguably works well with the two examples it gives – Christianity and Islam (here, reference is made to *tafseer*, a term used for the process of seeking God's intentions through systematic exploration of scriptural sources as found in Qur'anic commentaries, for instance; see Bowie et al., 2020, 18), but it is difficult to see how Hindu traditions, for instance, could be explored fruitfully and with the same focus on 'divine intent' and revelation (compare sections 3.4 and 5.2.4).

I would therefore conclude, in accordance with similar arguments made in previous chapters, that all theology-centred approaches to RE, including those with a particular hermeneutical focus and methodological design, should not be used exclusively, but rather as one methodological lens in a broader multi-disciplinary, multi-methodological approach to Religious Education – as is the case with Narrative Theology in the RE-searchers model, for example. This also relates to the general question of whether methodological approaches to RE should work with a single conceptualisation of religions (e.g. as narratives of life) and humans (e.g. as meaning-making beings; compare Biesta and Hannam, 2019) or if they should rather, as I claim in this thesis, work with a combination of different conceptualisations that – taken together – might reveal to the learner something about the great complexity of the phenomenon of religion/being religious and of the interrelatedness of the different dimensions of each religious tradition (see, for example, my use of Smart's seven-dimensional scheme of study in identifying primary and secondary theological objects of study in section 5.2.3).

Further to this, it is important to explain that Religious Education itself is sometimes construed as a 'hermeneutical event', in which case we are not only talking about hermeneutical methods or strategies *in* RE (as I do in this study), but also about the possibility of different types of hermeneutics *of* RE (see, for example, Aldridge, 2015 discussed in the next section). In this context, Bowie identifies, for example, three discoveries that lie at the heart of a 'hermeneutical realisation' in RE, namely (here, in slightly summarised form):

> (i) That all learners are, inevitably, *hermeneuts* as they are inextricably connected in their own journeys, with their own experiences, working assumptions and commitments;
> (ii) That religious traditions offer practices in discernment and are not simply deposits of that which has been found, and that these practices of discernment are an essential element of study;
> (iii) That teachers and educationalists are inevitably, *hermeneuts* in how they represent religion and belief, for example as either concepts and cognitive propositions held up by fragments from sacred texts (e.g. for deployment to win some argument), or as liturgies of life that facilitate a life of search and following. (Bowie, 2018, 243)

Here, one could speak of a view of RE that sees the subject as a hermeneutical event or condition, in this case described through the lens of a search for meaning which for the 'learner-as-hermeneut' can have multiple dimensions (see Bowie, 2018, 243). First, the learner may discover how other people search for meaning in their lives and why they do so in the myriad ways encountered in RE, which provides the learner with insights into the personal and/or communal quest(s) for meaning of others. But what is sometimes suggested, additionally, by proponents of such a view of Religious Education (see Roebben, 2004, 2016; Schweitzer, 2004; Vermeer, 2004) is that students – in a second step involving the skills of reflection and critical evaluation – may also consider the extent to which they themselves 'find value in living a life of search' (Bowie, 2018, 243).

This resonates with Cooling's interpretation of Thiselton's model of responsible hermeneutics summarised above. In a recent paper attempting to provide a more nuanced understanding of the Commission on Religious Education's (2018) report and the concept of worldviews, in particular (compare section 1.3), Cooling stresses the significance of considering two horizons in learning and teaching in Religion and Worldviews – the new subject envisioned by the Commission (Cooling, 2020). The first horizon is that of the worldview being studied in the classroom, and the second horizon is that of the participants in the learning process, here: students and teachers. Further to this, Cooling explains, the idea of responsible hermeneutics comprises three academic responsibilities of which the third one deserves special attention. The first responsibility is to 'rigorous study of the knowledge being taught' (Cooling, 2020, 9) and thus relates to the question of disciplinary knowledge recently discussed by Kueh (2018, 2020) or Georgiou and Wright (2018), for example. The second responsibility is to 'rigorous reflection on the contemporary context' (Cooling, 2020, 9) in which the study of religion(s) and worldview(s) takes place so that contextual influences on the pre-understandings of teachers and students are recognised – an aspect of learning and teaching emphasised, for example by Aldridge (2015, 2018), Freathy and John (2019b, 2019a) or Pett (2018b). And the third responsibility is to 'rigorous interrogation of the potential interaction between these two horizons' – the space where students may learn *from* religion (Grimmitt, 1987) and thus 'benefit in their own personal worldview and spiritual development' (Cooling, 2020, 9). This third point, Cooling argues, is particularly important as it helps to clear up a common misunderstanding of the report, e.g. reflected in Hannam and Biesta's (2019) criticism of the 'hermeneuticism' which they see in the Commission's recommendations (see sections 4.1.2 and 4.2.1). According to them, the main problem with the report is that worldviews are objectified as content to be studied and understood, which deprives learners of important insights into the existential dimension of religious belief, in short: what it means to have a religious orientation in life (Hannam & Biesta, 2019, 60). Yet, Cooling replies, choosing a hermeneutical approach to Religion and Worldviews could help to achieve the Commission's aim 'to enable each pupil to understand, reflect on and develop their own personal worldview' (CoRE, 2018, 5), precisely by taking the spiritual impact of the study of religion(s) and worldview(s) seriously. He therefore concludes (2020, 9): 'Hermeneutics without that dimension reduces education to instruction.' What the two examples of Bowie's and Cooling's recent arguments demonstrate is that hermeneutical RE is sometimes ascribed a transformative quality or potential in that it may help to form and/or transform the learners' perspectives on their own and others' religious and non-religious worldviews, which ultimately promotes personal spiritual development.

Whether or not spiritual transformation is an appropriate aim and outcome to choose for non-confessional Religious Education in schools without a religious affiliation, I would argue, ultimately depends on whether one ascribes the transformative quality of such meaning-making events, which learners may possibly experience in theology-centred RE, to some kind of divine revelation and hence, to 'absolute' or 'objective' truth (as critically discussed, for example, in the context of Strhan's Levinasian interpretation of transcendence-orientated theology in section 6.1) – an aim which would arguably conflict with the value of ontological impartiality, central to non-confessional, multi-faith RE. This problem is visible for example in Continental European descriptions of the hermeneutical condition of Religious Education which do not necessarily take into account contextual, disciplinary differences such as those determined by the legal parameters governing schools with and without a religious affiliation in England and Wales (compare section 1.3). Here, one could point to Schweitzer's description of the student as 'active subject in the learning process who becomes the agent of hermeneutics', entrusted with the task of interpreting both the Christian tradition and the contemporary world (Schweitzer, 2004, 83). This view of RE calls for a process of mediation, here between the Christian tradition and the learner's world of experience, which means that the 'truth at stake' in this search for meaning can and should mainly be seen through the lens of the learner's views and experiences, as a result of his or her meaning-constructive activity (Schweitzer, 2004, 80-82). Although Schweitzer thus stresses that in post-modern hermeneutical RE, there is no room for attempts at any top-down transmission of 'objective truth' from teacher to student (as found, perhaps, in the teaching of Christian catechisms permissible only in religiously affiliated schools), his idea of the 'hermeneutic condition of RE' is still in conflict with the values of non-confessional RE in English schools. In this case, a potential source of irreconcilability can be found in one of the aims of hermeneutical RE which Schweitzer seems to identify. This view is reflected in the function he ascribes to the very moment of 'sense-making':

> 'Hermeneutics is clearly more than a methodology. If it can be called a paradigm or "condition" for all theology, hermeneutics refers to the general situation of working with tradition, *which will only be accepted or appreciated and appropriated by contemporary people if it makes sense to them*' (Schweitzer, 2004, 79, my emphasis)

Drawing on Kelly's (2004) reply to Schweitzer, this statement can be taken to imply that the overall aim of letting the active subjects (or students of RE) interpret the Christian tradition through the prism of their own pre-understandings and life experiences is to enable them to make sense of that tradition in the specific (i.e. liberal/plural) context in which they find themselves today so that they may open up to the Christian faith and make some kind of self-chosen commitment that suits their personal needs. However, as argued above, neither acceptance of faith, nor appropriation of it, can be regarded as adequate aims – or pre-determined outcomes – of multi-faith RE in religiously unaffiliated schools in England and Wales.

Yet, as important as these considerations of the potential hermeneutical condition of Religious Education may be (and of the possible limitations of that condition in the non-affiliated school sector), it is important to emphasise that the scope of the arguments made in favour for hermeneutical RE in the above discussion exceeds, by far, what I mean by 'hermeneutical strategies' in the possible practical application of my transcendence-orientated, interreligious view of theology presented in the next section. This has to do with the place of these practical suggestions within the construction of my overall argument. It might therefore be useful to repeat that the hermeneutically orientated teaching strategies that I am going to recommend below are simply one aspect of my broader content-based/life-centred approach to interreligious theology, which itself is viewed as only one methodological lens within multi-methodological/multi-disciplinary RE, best employed temporarily and for the specific purpose of furthering students' theological understanding(s) of different theistic religions in non-confessional, multi-faith RE. It is therefore neither my aim to propose a hermeneutical approach to RE (where hermeneutics would be viewed as a methodological lens to adopt for the study of theistic religions or different views of the divine, specifically), nor is it my intention to imply that Religious Education itself should be viewed primarily as a hermeneutical event. What I am proposing instead are a number of possible and provisional practical teaching strategies which possess a hermeneutical dimension (in that they work with a broad view of 'text' and 'text' interpretation) and which, taken together, constitute what I have called a 'broader hermeneutical framework' in my preview on this part of the discussion in chapter 5. The best way to explain my understanding of hermeneutics in this particular circumstance is therefore by reference to a more general, common-sense use of the term as found in everyday language, namely as the *act* (not necessarily, *art*) of 'interpretation' – in this case: involved in encountering, investigating and reflecting on different views of the divine as expressed in a wide range of (e.g. textual, auditory and visual) media.

Furthermore, since it is not my goal to provide (in the present research, at least) a meaningful contribution to the current debate about hermeneutics in RE, I also refrain from defining in any detail how the complex relationship between text, author and reader (learner) would be construed, most adequately, in such learning situations in schools without a religious affiliation and to what extent, for example, the horizons of text (here: a particular view of the divine) and reader (here: student of God-centred RE) should overlap, let alone fuse with one another. This is partly because, for reasons explained in the previous chapters, I have chosen to concentrate primarily on the question of adequate representation of theistic religions in RE and criticised so called 'student-centred', e.g. experiential, views of RE that are mainly concerned with making religion(s) relevant to the learner's life world (see sections 4.2.2 and 4.2.3), and partly because such a philosophical development simply exceeds the main research focus of this study (analysing the perceived compatibility problem between theology and multi-faith RE). This does not mean that the question of the (potential) transformative quality of understanding (e.g. views of the divine) *through interpretation and meaning-making*, is not an important one to ask in the context of non-confessional Religious Education, and the absence of such an argument should not be taken as an indication that 'transformation' of the learner, regardless of the myriad ways in which it can be defined, is *per se* an inappropriate aim to pursue in non-confessional settings. What I mean instead is that developing such a highly complex and philosophical argument *specific to the sector of non-affiliated schools*, is too big a task to achieve within the constraints of this theoretical research, especially on the basis of purely provisional ideas for a practical implementation such as the ones proposed below. However, as we will see in the next section in my brief consideration of Aldridge's recent argument for a 'Hermeneutics of Religious Education' (Aldridge, 2015, 2018), there are interesting starting points from which such a non-confessional approach to transformative, hermeneutical RE could be developed in the future.

Having explained my use of the term 'hermeneutics' in this study as an act of interpretation of a given 'text' that expresses or reflects a particular view of the divine, I will now – in the next and final section of this chapter – turn to the tasks of concretisation and systematisation of my theoretical suggestions by presenting three methodological elements that could be used to put my transcendence-orientated, interreligious approach to theology into practice in schools without a religious affiliation. Taken together, these three practical elements form my own hermeneutical framework within which different theistic religions can be explored through the lens of transcendence-orientation. The purpose of that practical application is to offer insight into how my approach could, theoretically, be used for 'careful' systematic comparisons between theological concepts, teachings and related practices of different religions as well as for the discovery of logical interconnections between those objects of study within individual traditions – both of which I identified as important components of deep, theology-centred learning in section 5.1.1. (As indicated at the start of this chapter, I use the term 'careful comparison' to demonstrate awareness of the dangers of essentialism and religious and cultural relativism in the study of religions, especially when the methods and methodologies used seek to be potentially comparative such as the ones I propose. The next and final chapter will therefore move on to the important discussion of issues of particularity and universality in Religious Studies, with a view to creating a healthy balance between the two for this particular interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach.)

### 6.2.4 Using Interreligious, Transcendence-Orientated Theology in RE: Ideas for a Possible Practical Application

The following presentation of a possible practical application of my interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach to theology in multi-faith RE consists of three methodological elements, which together constitute what I describe in this thesis as a 'broader hermeneutical framework', rooted in the idea of transcendence-orientation. These three elements are:

- Development of a **general theoretical focus** on theological content of different theistic religions, e.g. through conceptually focused 'text' interpretation (whereby the word 'text' is understood broadly to include a wide range of different media)
- Introduction and use of an **interpretive framework** for the study of theistic faith traditions, structured around the idea of God-centredness in theistic belief
- And consideration of one **example of a (hermeneutical) teaching strategy** for interreligious investigation and comparison of theological content – Scriptural Reasoning.

To clarify further: the first element (general theoretical focus) has been defined in detail in chapter 5 (see primary and secondary theological objects of study in section 5.2.5) but will now be translated in a more concretised form in a few practical suggestions for content selection and initial conceptual exploration to be used in the classroom. The second element (interpretive framework) introduces four areas of God-centred investigation, on the basis of which belief in God can be explored, systematically, in the context of different theistic religions, both individually and in relation to one another. And the third element (the example of Scriptural Reasoning) is a possible teaching strategy, demonstrating how interfaith study and interreligious comparison could both take place in a 'difference-respecting' atmosphere in RE classrooms. It is important to note, though, that all three elements, including the hermeneutical teaching strategies proposed below, are just examples or initial ideas for practical concretisation and should therefore not be taken as definite (normative) instructions of what my interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach should look like in practice. (More examples of possible teaching strategies/resources to use, specifically, for interreligious comparison in RE can be found in the appendix; see sections 9.1 and 9.2. These, too, however, are simply *ideas* for a practical application.)

- **General Theoretical Focus: Key Concepts, Doctrines and Practices Relating to Belief in the Divine**

Since the first element – the development of a general theoretical focus – has been specified and discussed at length in chapter 5, it suffices to repeat it rather briefly here. I define theology in the study of religions in schools mainly by its objects of study, that is key theological concepts and teachings (as well as rituals and practices relating to belief in the divine – as we will see under the next two points: interpretive framework and teaching strategy). A practical application of this approach could therefore begin by providing students with opportunities to identify and investigate a number of central theological concepts and doctrines found in the respective theistic traditions, studied for the purpose of promoting theological understanding(s) of different religions in RE. This may include concepts dealing with the nature of God, individual deities or various ideas of ultimate reality (e.g. immanent/transcendent; personal/impersonal; etc.) as well as a set of beliefs, instructions and principles relating to the divine, as taught by central texts, figures and institutions of the given religions or religious branches. This can be done by interpreting a wide range of media including text (e.g. sacred scriptures; spiritual literature; academic textbooks; written case studies), audio (e.g. theological discussions, both professional and lay; recorded case studies and interviews with individual believers), video (e.g. documentaries; lectures; fictional films); objects (visual art and artefacts such as paintings, photography, iconography, devotional items, material markers of identity) and direct contact with representatives of theistic religions and worldviews (e.g. religious leaders; representatives of religious organisations; laypeople), to mention some of the options available to teachers. A very broad guiding question in this identification and investigation process could be: what does XY source/object/person tell us about belief in God (the divine) in the given tradition or branch of religion?

Given the wide range of choices and entry points to this theological investigation, this practice can be easily adapted to fit the needs of different age and ability groups, and it is also possible to choose, initially at least, simple terminology such as English translations of foreign words (i.e. 'oneness/unity of God' for '*tawhid*'; or 'self-centredness' for '*haumai*') when working with younger children, for example. Depending on the timeframe and age group concerned, a recommendation could be to explore up to five concepts and doctrines in no more than three traditions at a time (within one scheme of work), ideally not all being Abrahamic monotheisms. This is so as to be able to provide insights into a variety of theistic belief systems, e.g. one or two Abrahamic religion(s), combined with the Eastern monotheism of Sikhism and/or Hindu polytheistic traditions, whilst also reducing the risk of unnecessary confusion by limiting the overall number of religions to which students would initially have to relate the concepts and teachings. (The pedagogical decisions to work with a variety of religious contexts, but limit the overall number of concepts/doctrines to investigate are based on educational research in Cognitive Psychology, about the role of declarative knowledge in long-term memory formation, such as: Anderson, 1995; Ericsson & Kintsch, 1994; and Gagne, Yekovich; C., & Yekovich, F., 1993.) The aim of this development of a general theoretical focus, is a collection of theological items, e.g. recorded in the form of separate lists including the chosen concepts and teachings with brief definitions and/or example-based explanations, which students may keep for further familiarisation with the content in other activities of this example of a practical application of the interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach to theological content. (This first methodological element is also crucial to the process of elaboration mentioned below; see, for example, Herbert & Burt, 2004; Schunk, 2004).

Despite the fact that, at a theoretical level, this first (content-focused) theological exploration works with a limited number of interpretations of what religion is, mainly concentrating on conceptual and doctrinal types of understandings in RE, there is no need to be concerned that this learning process would lead students to gain only simplistic, impersonal forms of knowledge, leaving them unaware of the complexity of the phenomenon of religion and the relevance the learned content could potentially have to their own lives. Regarding complexity issues, it is arguable, for instance, that the sheer variety of media and resources listed above as possible entry points in this theological investigation has the potential to convey to students a certain sense of the immense diversity that exists both within and between religions. They are given the chance to gain insight into different ideas of the divine as articulated in a variety of ways – and manifested in different forms – in various cultural contexts and times.

Furthermore, as explained in the previous section, it is important to note that the act of identifying conceptual/doctrinal meanings in a wide range of resources, including texts and conversations, visual art and artefacts, has a hermeneutical dimension in the sense that students are given the opportunity to encounter, interpret and reflect on a variety of personal and communal understandings of theistic belief and the lived experiences of religious believers (see, for example, next bullet point below). Although providing a detailed discussion of what it would mean to take a hermeneutical *approach* to – as opposed to using hermeneutical *strategies* for – teaching and learning in the specific context of God-centred RE in religiously unaffiliated schools is not possible on the basis of the preliminary ideas for practical application proposed in this study, it is nevertheless useful to return, briefly, to the issue of interaction between teacher, student and object of study (here: views of the divine as expressed in various types of 'texts') and the question of the potential transformative power of understanding in such educational situations. As indicated in the previous section, David Aldridge's recent proposition for a 'Hermeneutics of Religious Education' (2015, 2018), drawing on key figures in the area of Philosophical Hermeneutics such as Heidegger (1962, 1984, 2011b, 2011a) and Gadamer (1986, 1991, 2004), might be a good starting point for future developments of what I have called 'a non-confessional approach to transformative, hermeneutical RE'.

According to Aldridge, a common mistake made in discussions about hermeneutics, e.g. in the context of Religious Education, is that the terms 'object of study' and 'subject matter' are often used synonymously, without recognising that the latter expression, if understood in the sense of Gadamer's concept '*die Sache*', is not only different from what is studied in RE, but also impossible to determine in advance of the learning moment (Aldridge, 2015, 106, 123). The subject matter, when interpreted that way, is not the content studied in RE (here: some text, problem or stimulus chosen by the teacher with pedagogical intent), but the *shared concern* or 'issue at stake' (e.g. in a RE lesson) which 'emerges' when three hermeneutic relations (teacher-student, teacher-object, student-object) are mutually achieved and 'converge in the event of learning' (Aldridge, 2015, 123). Aldridge explains this as follows: since the student must understand both the text and the teacher, and the teacher must understand and respond to the student, whilst also trying to convey his/her own understanding of the text, the three sides in this triangular relationship create a hermeneutical situation in which, in the case of mutual understanding on all sides, some shared concern arises (2018, 249). Although a central aspect of the learning outcome of this hermeneutical situation can thus neither be predicted in advance nor fully controlled by the teacher, it is possible to claim that the given pedagogical intent (such as developing students' theological understandings, in the case of this study) is 'vindicated at the point where there is some convergence of understanding across the three related hermeneutic situations' – that is, if a subject matter arises that is shared across the dialogical relationships of teacher-student, teacher-object and student-object (Aldridge, 2018, 249).

However, as Aldridge further specifies, this view of the hermeneutical interaction also has a significant ontological implication, captured by him in the notion of *mutual belonging* (2015, 125-129; 2018, 253). What this means is that the subject matter emerging in the event of learning should not be viewed as 'the epistemological achievement of individuals', but as 'an ontological relationship with the world' (Aldridge, 2015, 124). Thus, it is arguable that, in the very moment of understanding, all three sides of the triangle, teacher, student and text, will find themselves 'in a relationship of mutual "belonging"' – understood in the Gadamerian sense that they all *belong to the subject matter* (Aldridge, 2015, 127), which ultimately transforms the moment of learning into a moment of belonging, however fleeting the latter may be. Viewed in this light – one could claim – it might not matter so much whether the approach one takes to the development of students' theological understandings has a content-based component such as mine because in the end:

> 'The co-relation to the subject matter that emerges is not one of "knowledge" but of orientation: in the moment of understanding, text, student and teacher come to be oriented towards the world in a related way.' (Aldridge, 2015, 124-125)

This also relates to the ways in which the relationship between Grimmitt's concepts of 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion (see Grimmitt, 1987; Grimmitt & Read, 1977) could be viewed in Religious Education. Here, Aldridge draws on Gadamer's critique of a deep-seated, but erroneous assumption in the history of hermeneutics, namely that *subtilitas intelligenti* (understanding the text's meaning) and *subtilitas applicandi* (discerning its relevance to one's life) are two separable stages and/or aims of the learning process (Gadamer, 2004, 306-310). Instead, one could argue, as Hella and Wright have done, that interpretation and application are only one single movement because coming to know the world always automatically implies an element of self-knowledge (Hella & Wright, 2009; compare Aldridge, 2015, 128). From this point of view, the moment of mutual understanding can always be seen as 'transformational' in the broad ontological sense described above. What happens in the act of understanding a 'text' is that a new 'subject matter' arises, distinct from the chosen object of study, and this subject matter has a transformative quality:

> 'The new orientation towards subject matter that emerges in understanding constitutes a transformation in the relation to being of the one who understands. Gadamer discusses this with reference to the distinction in traditional theological and legal hermeneutics between "interpretation" and "application". In philosophical hermeneutics these two moments cannot be separated. *A text teaches nothing unless it teaches it "to me"*. This is an important point for the reception of philosophical hermeneutics into religious education: *there is no understanding that can be separated from its transformational effect on the one who understands – or no "learning about" without always an attendant "learning from"* (Aldridge 2011, 2015, 125-129)' (Aldridge, 2018, 248-249, my emphases)

If we apply this to the area of conceptual understanding, for example, we might argue then: 'a theological concept teaches nothing unless it teaches it *to someone*, that is the subject – here: learner of RE – who comes to understand that object of study, and by understanding and responding to it, is changed in the process (however slightly this may be, one might add). It can therefore be claimed that simple 'learning about'/'learning from' distinctions in RE (especially if both aspects are portrayed as separate, unconnected elements in the learning process of which only the latter has the potential to relate what is learned to the personal life of the learner) trivialises the complex relationship between student, teacher, object of study (which, in the case of concepts and doctrines, can be an abstract idea) and the practical media and methods through which that (abstract) object is approached (compare Aldridge, 2018, 249).

It is on the basis of this particular philosophical-ontological understanding of transformation that I believe an approach to transformative, hermeneutical RE – including a God-centred approach to RE such as mine – could possibly be constructed in a way that would be suitable for the specific context of non-confessional, multi-faith Religious Education in schools without a religious designation. As explained in the previous section, however, it must be repeated that this also entails that Truth, despite the capital T we might want to give to it in such a circumstance, needs to be understood not in an absolute/objective sense in RE, but in a dialogical/relational one. In response to the arguments made by Wright (see sections 6.1.2 and 6.1.3) and Hand (see section 4.1.1), Aldridge therefore concludes: 'Recasting the "possibility of truth" argument [as a justification for RE] in ontological terms (…) requires that we see the truth concerned not as the truth of one or other holistic theory of being, but as the possibility of disclosure in the dialogic encounter with a particular text or object of study' (Aldridge, 2015, 175, my insertion). This way of thinking about Truth and Transformation in RE, it seems to me, might be a good starting point for potential further developments of the hermeneutical framework for the possible practical application of my interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach, included here in the form of three methodological elements.

However, as argued in chapters 4 and 6 of this thesis, this argument for the inseparability of the attainment targets of learning about/learning from religion(s) in RE should not imply that a content-focused, methodological approach such as mine, furthering (in the first instance, at least) 'learning-about' types of theological knowledge, is freed from the task of balancing different conceptualisations of religion(s) both in its theoretical construction and practical application. For this reason, I proposed the theory that this approach to theology, primarily concerned with the study of concepts/doctrines, should be combined with a more believer-/life-orientated one that uses the idea of God-centredness in theistic belief as an interpretive lens through which to gain insight into the ways in which affiliates of theistic traditions and worldviews see their relationships with the divine. As a next step, I will further develop this lens into an interpretive framework offering opportunities for systematic explorations of theistic belief(s) by proposing four areas of God-centred investigation to use in relation to different theistic traditions.

- **Interpretive Framework: God-Centredness as an Organising Principle for Systematic Interreligious Investigations**

As explained above, the second methodological element in this example of a practical application is an interpretive framework that uses the organising principle of God-centredness in theistic belief as a means to promote systematic interreligious explorations in multi-faith RE (see section 6.2.1), thus combining earlier propositional/doctrinal focal points in the study of theistic belief(s) with the broader conception of being religious as a mode of existing in the world. It attempts to provide opportunities for the study of people's ideas of the divine and the relationships they express themselves to have with the divine in their individual and communal lives. What lies at the heart of this framework, in other words, is an existential, life-centred interpretation of what it means to have a theistic faith as something which inevitably involves a certain God-centredness in life, or 'Reality-centredness' as Hick called it (1989), visible in turn in the ways theists (intend to) live their lives, namely in relation and/or response to said Reality. However, to avoid the essentialist and, possibly, relativistic tendencies found in Hick's unitary, pluralist interpretation of religion (Hick, 1989; see also section 7.2 below), I use the term 'God-centredness', understood here to include all notions of the divine, as distinct as possible from its problematic soteriological connotations, namely as a mainly observation-based description of that which undoubtedly forms the centre of lives lived in such faith: a special directedness towards the divine. Rather than concentrating (like Hick) on *what (theistic) religions do* – a question which is closely related to issues of doctrinal truth and the potential salvific power of individual traditions – I suggest putting the emphasis on people's views of the divine, the ways they define their relationships with their God, gods or other forms of absolute reality, and how they lead – or intend to lead – their personal and communal lives as a result. One way for students to explore these aspects, systematically, that is with a constant awareness of this God-centredness in mind, is by concentrating on the following four interrelated areas of investigation in relation to different expressions of theistic belief:

**(i)** **Believers' definitions, conceptions and understandings of the divine (as articulated by adherents of a variety of theistic traditions)**: this includes abstract theological/philosophical concepts of the divine as found in different theologies; explicit and implicit definitions of the nature of the divine as voiced by professional and lay representatives of individual traditions as well as broader descriptions and explanations of what it means to have a theistic faith for individuals and communities in different religious traditions, cultural contexts and times, etc.

**(ii)** **Believers' accounts of their personal and communal experiences and understandings of the relationship they have with the divine**: this includes explicit and implicit definitions of the relationship believers express themselves to have with the divine; their descriptions of how they understand this relationship; personal and communal accounts of how contact with the divine is lived and experienced in different theistic traditions; personal reports of emotional reactions in response to experienced divine presence, etc.

**(iii)** **Believers' explanations of how they (intend to) lead their individual and communal lives as a result of their orientation towards the divine**: this includes personal accounts of how believers respond to divine presence in their lives, both at an emotional and practical level; descriptions of the God-centred practices they perform; and both lay and professionally formulated identifications of the principles believers seek to follow and apply to their lives, as well as the values they have as a result of their theistic belief or worldview, etc.

(iv) **Believers' self-identified reasons and explanations of why they (intend to) lead God-centred lives**: this relates back to the third research area and thus mainly includes considerations of why individuals and communities do all the things listed under point three, e.g. for which purpose/purposes and/or for which higher end/ends, etc.

This specification of research areas, however, should not create the impression that definite, let alone, simple findings will be the result of such explorations in the classroom. Instead, these areas should be understood as broad focal points for discussion, opening inquiries and potential dialogues with a wide range of perspectives on and within theistic belief. As with the hermeneutical strategies described above (first element: general theoretical focus), this, too, can either be done by concentrating on verbal/written expressions of theistic beliefs and practices, articulated directly by representatives of a variety of traditions (e.g. in statements of religious leaders, spiritual guides, spokespeople of organisations or lay practitioners) or by applying this interpretive lens to a wide range of other theologically relevant media such as textual sources, visual and auditory media and material objects, thus (re-)interpreting them in the light of the concept of God-centredness. In this case, the four areas of investigation could also be reformulated as broad guiding questions: (i) what does this 'text' tell us about believers' definitions, conceptions and understandings of the divine?; (ii) what does it tell us about the relationships that believers have with the divine?; (iii) what does it tell us about the lives that believers (intend to) lead as a result of their orientation towards the divine? And (iv) what does it tell us about the reasons that believers might have for leading God-centred lives? By using this interpretive framework, students are thus given the chance to explore theistic belief(s) in relation to all five theistic religions studied in RE (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Hinduism), with a combined focus on conceptual/doctrinal aspects of religion(s), embedded in a broader, life-centred view of being religious as a God-centred way of being in the world.

It is in this context that I think it legitimate – and crucial to the development of students' theological understanding(s) – to begin the process of 'careful comparison' between theistic religions and branches of individual traditions to promote deep learning in RE, always reminding students to bear in mind the great complexity of the phenomenon of religion and the resulting inappropriateness of simple generalisations. There are several reasons why such a comparative focus is important. The first one is the general intuition that, whether we have a religious belief or not, we are likely to understand the phenomenon of religion better when we are familiar with more than just one tradition, when we are able to articulate what some or all of these traditions may have in common, and when we are also aware of the particularities (e.g. reflected in beliefs and practices) that make each religion unique. Moreover, using comparative methods in RE – such as the practice of setting in relation, comparing and contrasting theological content of different religions – has the potential to facilitate learning in a number of ways. Arguably, it is easier, for example, to memorise, analyse, reflect on and understand individual concepts and teachings of one religion if they are set in relation not just to one another (e.g. by identifying logical links of different theological content within that tradition, as the above framework suggests), but also with similar and/or contrasting aspects of other religions. This argument can be justified on the grounds of research in the field of Cognitive Psychology such as the development of (e.g. propositional) networks in information storing and processes of elaboration in long-term memory formation. Elaboration, for example, refers to the cognitive process of 'adding meaning to new information by connecting the information with already existing knowledge' so as to be able to 'construct an understanding' (Woolfolk, Hughes, & Walkup, 2008, 313-314). Interconnecting material in this way, when first learning it, thus facilitates both long-term storage and active retrieval of existing information because the more one piece of knowledge is linked with other, existing pieces, the more routes are created in the brain to get to the original information (see Schunk, 2004). Woolfolk, Hughes and Walkup therefore conclude: 'The more learners elaborate new ideas, the more they "make them their own", the deeper their understanding and the better their memory for the knowledge will be' (Woolfolk et al., 2008, 314).

Identifying (e.g. conceptual/doctrinal) links between theological content across religious boundaries, I would therefore claim, can contribute to deeper understandings of each individual theistic religion considered in RE as well as of the broader issue of interreligious relations. Here, one could point to the possibility that the significance of individual concepts, related to monotheistic interpretations of the oneness of God, such as *tawhid* in

Islam or *ik onkar* in Sikhism can be grasped more clearly if they are set in relation, and perhaps contrasted cautiously, with the doctrine of the Trinity in the Christian tradition[70]. Such differentiations, one might also expect, could contribute to more elaborate, here: theologically informed, discussions of areas of conflict, but also theological agreement, in Christian-Muslim relations past and present, for instance. This leads us to the final reason why enabling students to compare theological content of different religions can be beneficial to their learning process in RE. As explained in chapter 5, an overall aim of my interreligious approach to theology is to promote students' development of a network of RE-specific, specialist subject knowledge related to the theological dimensions of different religions, by furthering awareness – across cultural and religious boundaries – of the theoretical/philosophical interconnectedness of the theological content thus studied in RE. This type of learning, I concluded, can be classified as '*deep* learning' because it leads to a more sophisticated, more nuanced understanding of theistic belief than other, non-comparative approaches to theology in multi-faith contexts would do.

In the final part of this chapter, I will present a teaching strategy, based on the principles of Scriptural Reasoning, which I believe incorporates all major aspects that are central to my interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach (theological focus, interfaith concern and the potential for careful comparison) and could therefore be a useful resource for theology-centred, multi-faith RE. This example of a teaching strategy is the last of the three methodological elements of this possible practical application of my approach, which (taken together) constitute what I have called a 'broader hermeneutical framework' for interreligious theology.

- **Scriptural Reasoning – A Useful Resource for Interreligious Comparisons of Theological Subject Matter**

To explain how Scriptural Reasoning could be used in the specific context of non-confessional, multi-faith RE in religiously unaffiliated schools, I need to provide some background information to this practice: Scriptural Reasoning is best described as an interdisciplinary, interfaith scriptural study and reading, taking place mainly between Jews, Christians and Muslims, which is rooted in the textual reasoning, conducted among Jewish scholars (of Tanakh and Talmud) in the mid-twentieth century and Western philosophers (see Ford, 2006). Scholars such as Buber, Levinas, Cohen and Rosenzweig, trained in both

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[70] This aspect is further explored in appendix 9.1: Supplementary Teaching Strategies and Resources for Interreligious Comparisons of Theological Content.

Jewish exegesis and Western academic methods and dissatisfied with the lack of constructive engagement between the two disciplines, came together to study Jewish sacred texts in dialogue with Western philosophy, thus bringing together classical Jewish interpretation and the practices of modern philosophical/theological reasoning (Ford, 2006, 347). Their intention was, among other things, to explore the role that post-Shoah Judaism might play in the world by investigating not just Western modernity in the context of which the Holocaust had occurred, but also 'the resources – premodern, modern and postmodern – for responding to it within Judaism' (Ford, 2006, 347). According to them, two things were needed from post-Shoah Judaism; first, a new type of appropriation of its scriptures and hermeneutical traditions; and second, a deeper engagement and dialogue with people from other faith traditions and Christians and Muslims, specifically. At the end of the twentieth century, these intrareligious Jewish debates, together with similar discussions among Christian proponents of 'postcritical, "postliberal" hermeneutics' (see, for example, Lindbeck and Frei) led to the emergence of what is now commonly known as 'Abrahamic interfaith scriptural reading' – an interfaith practice, originally occurring mainly among adherents of the three Abrahamic monotheisms, but increasingly extended also to other religions. Nowadays, such interfaith study groups meet, for instance, to read, analyse and interpret texts from their respective scriptures with a view to exploring various ways in which scriptural reading and reasoning can help them to make sense of and respond to pressing contemporary issues including globalisation, religious and cultural diversity in modern plural societies; militant Islamism and the Middle East conflict (Ford, 2006, 347) (see also Pfaff, 2014: *Interfaith Dialogue and the Significance of Difference*, unpublished MA dissertation).

One way of translating this interfaith practice into the educational setting of non-confessional, multi-faith RE is to ask students to engage in activities that are based on the model of Scriptural Reasoning. This could be done in various ways, one being that students (e.g. drawing on what they have learned as a result of their engagement with the two other methodological elements described above) invent together and also write down (e.g. in small groups) a discussion between two or three religious adherents, using extracts from their respective sacred texts as an interpretive basis for discussion of a specific theological problem or question. As I will show below, in this context, it can be particularly helpful to concentrate on a small set of interrelated concepts or teachings for each tradition represented in the activity and use them, specifically, as focal points for comparison. These conversations could then be reported back by the students to the whole class, thus giving other groups (who may have looked at a different set of belief systems and theological question) the chance to observe and analyse such Scriptural Reasoning, again with a special focus on conceptual and doctrinal similarities and differences.

In a recent multi-authored RE textbook, entitled *Who Is Jesus? Supplementary Materials for Religious Education in the Upper Secondary School* (2018) written by Rob Freathy, Esther Reed, Anna Davis, Helen John and myself, we have proposed the following application of such an interreligious approach, here for a secondary-school audience. The textbook conducts a multi-perspectival examination of the figure of Jesus, encountered through a variety of methodological lenses including historical, theological, Biblical, socio-cultural, anthropological and interreligious ones. These methodological viewpoints are, in turn, exemplified, by a number of fictional and non-fictional scholars, reflecting on Jesus (and discussing with one another the question who Jesus is) from their academic viewpoints. One of the chapters, Who is Jesus for Muslims? (Freathy, Reed, Davis, John, & Schmidt, 2018, 31-42; see also appendix 9.2), guides students through a number of exercises, starting with a general examination of Islam – the meaning of *Sunnah*, Sunni and Shi'a Islam, the Five Pillars, and the life and legacy of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and moving on to the wider question of the role and significance of prophethood in Islam. Through the eyes of two fictional academics – a scholar of Islam and a Christian theologian, the students then encounter different perspectives on the role and status of Jesus. The emphasis here is on the Christian view of Jesus as the Son of God and Messiah and Muslim beliefs in the prophethood of Christ. This is combined with a specific doctrinal focus on God as Father, Son and Holy Ghost (Trinity) and God as absolute oneness (*tawhid*), all of which is explored in a number of exercises using comparative methods, some of which also draw on a selection of scriptural sources from both traditions. Examples of these exercises are:

> 'Read the views of [the two scholars] and compare them with the Qur'anic sources. Which Qur'anic source reflects which Muslim belief about Jesus? Do any of the sources contradict one or more Christian beliefs about Jesus?' (Freathy et al., 2018, 37, my insertion; see also appendix 9.2).

Having explored both commonalities and differences in Christian and Muslim views about Jesus in this way, students are then given the opportunity to learn about the interfaith practice of Scriptural Reasoning and to engage in such scripture study – again, on the basis of the textual sources selected in the chapter – by writing a dialogue between a Muslim and Christian discussing the question who Jesus is from their point of view (see p. 39 and appendix 9.2).

It is arguable that Scriptural Reasoning is a particularly useful resource for studying the theological dimensions of different religions through the method of 'careful comparison' in multi-faith RE because it is capable of honouring theological agreement and disagreement in interfaith relations at the same time. As I have argued elsewhere (see Pfaff, 2014, 35-38), Scriptural Reasoning practices avoid simple egalitarianisms that overemphasise commonalities in beliefs, doctrines and practices, for instance, or seek to identify a common core in all participating religions, recognising instead the significance of religious and cultural differences as invaluable resources for interfaith dialogue. Drawing on Ford (2006), I have claimed that the reason why Scriptural Reasoning counts as a 'difference-respecting practice', in this sense, is that:

> 'it rests on the idea of "Abrahamic collegiality", a principle aimed at interreligious friendship, not consensus. Just like friends who do not necessarily have to agree upon everything in order to be friends, members of different religions, engaging in interfaith scripture study, need not always arrive at a consensus on critical theological issues in order to engage with one another in mutual trust and friendship. An important notion used to describe the social dynamics of this encounter is that of a "three-way mutual hospitality" on the basis of which "each [religion] is host to the others and guest to the others", just as "each welcomes the other two to their home scripture and its traditions of interpretation" (Ford, 2006, 349). Although consensus may happen in an atmosphere of hospitality, a "recognition of deep differences" is also possible (Ford, 2006, 349).' (Pfaff, 2014, 36-37, insertion in the text)

To help students develop an appreciation of the significance of difference in interreligious relations, both in real-life interfaith encounters, but also Scriptural Reasoning activities in RE, it is possible to appeal to this friendship analogy. In the RE textbook *Who is Jesus?*, the chapter on Muslim views therefore includes an information box that describes Scriptural Reasoning, among other things, as an interfaith activity whose goal is to enable participants 'to share and discuss spiritual insights in *an atmosphere of hospitality, mutual trust, respect and potential friendship*' (Freathy et al., 2018, 38, my emphasis). This made it possible to refer to this aspect again in the actual wording of the respective exercise:

> 'Write a dialogue between a Muslim and a Christian who engage in Scriptural Reasoning about the question: Who is Jesus? Use one of the Qur'anic sources […] as a basis for the discussion. *(Remember that the aim of Scriptural Reasoning is not to convince others of your opinion but to offer room for the exchange of insights shared in an atmosphere of mutual respect.)*' (Freathy et al., 2018, 39, emphasis in the text)

Scriptural Reasoning, it is evident then, offers great opportunities for interfaith activity to be carried out in a 'difference-respecting learning atmosphere' and is thus particularly suitable for schools without a religious affiliation.[71] (More ideas for possible practical applications of my approach, with a special focus on comparative theological investigations – also beyond Abrahamic monotheism and interfaith scripture study – are included in appendix 9.1: Supplementary Teaching Strategies and Resources for Interreligious Comparisons of Theological Content.) This brings us to the final chapter of this thesis: a closer consideration of the important issue of balancing questions of universality and particularity in the comparative study of (here: theistic) religions.

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[71] For more information on how Scriptural Reasoning can be integrated in British Religious Education and primary schools, specifically, see Mosely, 2018: *An Inquiry into the Development of Intercultural Learning in Primary Schools Using Applied Scriptural Reasoning Principles* (Mosely, 2018, unpublished PhD thesis).

# 7 Interreligious Comparison and Questions of Universality and Particularity in the Context of the Study of (Theistic) Religion(s)

The previous chapter proposed the idea of transcendence-orientation as an existentially focused (life-centred) interpretive lens to use for the promotion of theological understanding(s) in RE. In my presentation of a possible multi-strategic application of this interreligious approach to theology (see three methodological elements suggested in section 6.2.4), I then used this idea of transcendence-orientation, which I also translated as 'God-centredness' in the case of theistic religions, as a focal point for comparative conceptual and doctrinal learning in RE. Now it is time to consider, in this final chapter, questions of universality and particularity in the context of Comparative Religion. Before explaining why this final step is important, I will repeat, briefly, with which definitions of these two terms I have operated in this study so far. As indicated in the introduction (section 1.2), I understand 'particularity' as a quality that is specific or unique to an object/phenomenon in the world or a group of people. Focusing on the particularities of individual religious traditions, for instance, means concentrating on that which is specific or special about them and makes them distinct from other traditions. A focus on the particularities of religious traditions can thus bring out differences in belief, value and practice that exist both within and between religions. Universality, by contrast, is defined here as a quality that is shared by several objects/phenomena in the world or groups of people. To begin with, approaching the study of religion(s) through a universalist lens or method of investigation may shed light on that which religions have in common or that which makes them alike in certain (important) respects, e.g. in terms of their values and principles, myths and narratives, beliefs and practices, organisational structures, etc. Moreover, another way of interpreting 'universality', in this context, is to think of it as a quality which is thought to be true in or adequate/appropriate for all situations and (e.g. cultural/religious) contexts. For example, ethical pluralists such as Knitter (1995, 1996), Küng (1993; Küng & Kuschel, Eds., 1996) or Ruland (2002) promote a universalist view of religions, based on what is sometimes called 'global ethics projects' (see Küng, in particular), that sees ethical principles such as love and compassion as a common denominator and/or the true core of all religious traditions, in short, fundamental human values that are not relative to culture. However, especially this latter view causes problems in the (comparative) study of religions since it can easily lead to essentialist/relativist interpretations of religion(s).

In connection with Teece's soteriological approach (2008, 2010c, 2012), based on Hick's pluralist interpretation of religion (1989), I therefore indicated in chapters 3 and 6, it is particularly important to consider the dangers of essentialism and religious/cultural relativism which are, arguably, involved in interreligious and comparative projects in Theology and Religious Studies, identifying a common core in all or certain groups of religious traditions. Thus, one could possibly claim, such essentialising/relativizing tendencies are visible in Hick's/Teece's focus on human spiritual transformation in post-axial religions or in my concentration on the believer's orientation towards the divine in theistic religions. To approach these issues and explain why a very 'mild' version of essentialism – as I would define it – is justifiable in the case of my transcendence-orientated approach to theology in RE and does not lead to a relativist, difference-ignoring view of religions, I will divide this final chapter into three sections. The first one (7.1) discusses important arguments, recently collected by Schmidt-Leukel and Nehring (2016) for the necessity of reconsidering, reintroducing and reconstructing interreligious comparisons, both within Religious Studies and Theology, despite decades of harsh critique of this practice. Relating these aspects back to the context of multi-faith RE, I will show how allowing careful interreligious comparison to take place in the study of religions in schools may serve as a shared interest for interdisciplinary collaboration between the broader Religious-Studies approach of RE and those types of Theology within which interreligious and comparative practices (e.g. in the form of interfaith dialogue and interfaith study) are already flourishing today (Schmidt-Leukel & Nehring, Eds., 2016). This will be followed, in the second part (7.2) by a further discussion and criticism of Teece's soteriological framework for RE, based on Hick's pluralist interpretation of religion, all with a view to minimising the risks of essentialism and relativism in the study of religion(s) in schools as much as possible. This chapter – and with it, the whole discussion – will then end with a demonstration (in section 7.3) of how my own believer- or life-centred interpretive framework, structured around the idea of God-centredness in theistic belief, has the capacity to overcome these problems by balancing issues of universality and particularity both at the level of theory and practical application, namely by *bracketing* the question of the salvific quality of religions and exploring instead people's views of and their relationships with the divine from the procedurally agnostic perspective, described in the previous chapter (6.2.1).

## 7.1 New Insights in Comparative Religion and Implications for the Study of Theological Content in RE

The multi-authored book edited by Schmidt-Leukel and Nehring, *Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology: Comparison Revisited* (2016), begins with the question of how the discipline of Religious Studies can do justice to the demands of a globalised world if it limits itself too much on the study of that which is specific about individual religions and avoids questions of generalisability and potential comparability, e.g. for fear of repeating the mistakes of early comparative approaches such as Mircea Eliade's phenomenology (Eliade, 1958, 1961, 1971). To understand this appeal for a modern reconstruction of interreligious comparison in Religious Studies in the light of common doubts and objections, we need to consider, briefly, the difficult past of Comparative Religion, often associated with Eliade's early works in particular, see for example: *Patterns of Comparative Religion* (1958). In this work, Eliade investigated what he referred to as the 'archaic religions of ancient Asia, Europe and America', through comparative methods, rooted in the phenomenological idea of the irreducibility of the sacred (see also section 1.2). Yet, the main problem with this approach was that, despite attempts to adopt a phenomenological *epoché* (suspension of judgement), the comparisons undertaken by him were without doubt undertaken from a superior (i.e. moral, spiritual, political) perspective. It can be argued, for example, that Eliade endorsed a universalist view of religions (of the problematic second type outlined in my definition above) that gave rise to a politically 'dangerous theory of supremacy', according to which 'Christianity is the measure of all things' (Smith, 2000b 342, 2000a). Another controversial aspect of this interpretation of Comparative Religion was that it arguably reduced religions to a number of questionable essences. This becomes evident when we consider Eliade's concept of archetypes. In *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1971), he suggested the metaphysical theory that everything that surrounds us, from natural objects and places such as mountains and rivers to human-built constructions such as cities – have an 'extraterrestrial archetype' which, in addition to its worldly manifestation, exists on a higher cosmic level (Eliade, 1971, 9). However, all these objects and places, independent of whether they are natural or human-built, are ascribed 'no validity beyond that which is due to the extraterrestrial prototype' (Eliade, 1971, 10).[72]

That this has questionable implications for the study of religions can be seen in Eliade's example of the Indian *asvattha* tree to which he ascribes a broader, universal meaning, which he sees as much more important than the particularistic, culturally specific one (Eliade, 1958, 3). As I have summarised elsewhere (Pfaff, 2013[73]):

> 'By means of what Jonathan Z. Smith calls "synoptic viewing" – "see[ing] the data in their relation to one another and mak[ing] a summary of them in a general picture without putting it in the form of an hypothesis regarding the temporal development" – Eliade focuses solely on formal relationships (between theories, narratives, rituals) thus stressing, if not *creating,* similarities between the world religions (Smith, 2000a, 318). His "Cosmic Tree" example illustrates this: the greatest experiences of *hierophanies* (manifestations of the sacred), he explains, "are not only alike in content, but also alike in their expression" (Eliade, 1958, 3). Thus, the Indian *asvattha* tree, although being spiritually meaningful only to particular Indians at a particular place and time, also possesses "universal quality" in that it symbolises, simultaneously, the universe in its "constant renewal of life" as "represented by all the Cosmic Trees in all mythologies" (Eliade, 1958, 3). This reveals that Eliade, instead of investigating the *asvattha* tree in its own right to begin with, directly shifts the focus from the locality of this object and corresponding practices (e.g. veneration) to the universality of its supposed theoretical meaning, here: its function as *axis mundi* (Eliade, 1958, 3).' (Pfaff, 2013, 10, emphases and insertions in the text)

Arguably, it is this kind of synoptic viewing (perhaps a general risk involved in the phenomenologist's attempt to adopt an *eidetic* vision) that leads to serious problems here. By solely stressing similarities in theory (myth of origin, archetypes, etc.), without taking into account potential differences in practice and material culture, for example, Eliade promoted a religious universalism that simply did not do justice to the complexity of religious belief. I therefore concluded:

> 'The strict focus on formal relations and their alleged theoretical implications leaves no room for a genuine appreciation of the particularity and contextuality of that which is

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[72] As a result of his theory of extra-terrestrial archetypes, Eliade operated with a strict distinction or division of the world into two realms, the sacred and the profane. However, since the profane gains its meaning solely through 'participation in the transcendent reality' (e.g. by repeating cosmic acts such as the act of creation), the sacred is constantly required to manifest itself in hierophanies, and can thus be viewed as a sacred site around which humanity orients itself (Eliade, 1971, 11). So, these hierophanies, understood here as fixed points of contact between profane and sacred, ultimately function as 'central axes' which connect worldly and sacred/transcendent existence. Eliade points out that these types of beliefs about the relation between the sacred and the profane can be found, without exception, in all ancient mythologies, (e.g. in myths and narratives about the 'Cosmic Tree' or 'Sacred Mountain, etc.) and are therefore universal in nature (Eliade, 1971, 12).

[73] See Pfaff, A. (2013). Material Religious Objects as Expressions of Lived Experience: The Significance of Material Culture within the Study of Religion. MA Module: Advanced Theories in the Study of Religions. University of Chester.

> studied in each religion. In the case of the tree example, bringing in the material dimension of religion(s), one might even go as far as to say that Eliade's phenomenology completely ignores the intrinsic value of the given material object, viewing it instead solely through the lens of a supposed theoretical unity of religions. Instead of considering the *asvattha* tree in its own right, e.g. as a manifestation of the spiritual experience of individual believers providing insights into lived religion, Eliade misuses this object (…) as a mere illustration of his theoretical ideas. This, in turn, leads to an overgeneralisation of the conceptual content as well as the special cultural significance of the objects under consideration' (Pfaff, 2013, 11)

If interpreted in this way, it is evident then, using comparative methods in Religious Studies can be problematic because it portrays individual religious traditions, with little attention given to their uniqueness and particularity, in rather essentialist/relativist/universalist ways.

However, just because Comparative Religion bears certain risks if conceptualised and put into practice in this controversial way, there is no reason to reject this methodological approach as a whole or to give up on everything that is gained through comparison in the study of religions (see section 6.2 for RE-specific examples). For instance, when criticised, the process of comparing is often portrayed as a way of looking at religions that necessarily entails identifying commonalities, shared essences, universalities, etc. As already indicated in chapter 1, however, there is no reason why the comparative study of religions cannot be viewed as a practice that simply identifies, focuses on and explores similarities and differences that exist between and within individual traditions, without assuming that every time two religious phenomena are found to be similar, they must also be the same. Seeing the two as identical prepares the path to various *trans*-religious approaches to comparison – Eliade's and Hick's works might be interpretable in this way. What this thesis has suggested instead is a transcendence-orientated approach to the study of theistic traditions, using the methods of *inter*-religious comparison. This, we will see at the end of this chapter, can much more easily be done in a way that balances issues of similarity/difference, generalisability/uniqueness and universality/particularity in the study of religions.

In response to such common scepticisms towards Comparative Religion, Paul Hedges, one of the contributors to Schmidt-Leukel and Nehring's recent publication, summarises three main arguments for a revivification of interreligious comparison in Religious Studies today. One of the points he makes is based on findings in the relatively new sphere of psychological and scientific approaches to religious origins that see religions as a 'common human response, at a species level, to the world' (Hedges, 2016, 22). Here, one might interpret the term 'common' to mean 'frequent', rather than having any universalist connotations of the sort considered above. Therefore, it must also be clarified that this argument should not be confused with the assertion that religion is a *sui generis* category of human existence, shared, *in the same way,* by all religious believers in all cultural contexts and times (compare sections 3.3 and 4.1). Instead, the focus is on the biological constitution of (human) animals here. Thus, Hedges suggests, it may be reasonable to support the case of interreligious comparison on the grounds that religion is a natural response to the world. Although one might question this assumption on the grounds that others will certainly see religion as an '*un*-natural' response to the world and that it does not explain the actions of those who do not respond to life in religious ways, Hedges might have a point here if we reinterpret his argument (in the quantitative sense suggested above) to say that 'religion is a *frequent* natural response to the world'. From such a psychological/scientific perspective, Hedges claims, there 'may well be a certain range of possibilities, or patterns, in how essentially identical instinctual or reasoned responses will arise as (human) animals work out their relationship to the world around them, and of which they are a part' (Hedges 2016, 22). This, however, is different from Eliade's view of the sacred as existing as a separate reality above the everyday-world of the profane:

> 'As such, rather than using an Eliadean comparison, which explicitly argues that what we saw as patterns within religions provide evidence of a common quest or response to one spiritual experience, it may be possible to revive a comparative study that understands patterns as part of a species-level instinctive reaction. Obviously, such a comparative analysis would need to be alert to the very considerable differences between systems over which Eliade's work ran roughshod; nevertheless, I suspect it would be meaningful to speak about notions like ritual washing, the symbolism of mountains/ascent, and responses to and use of caves as being in some ways similar.' (Hedges, 2016, 22).

Hence, Hedges summarises: if it is true that humans will typically (or at least, frequently, as I have argued) exhibit, across cultural contexts, a level of similarity in their instinctive reactions to the world and religious responses are one example, there is no reason to doubt that these (religious) responses are worth investigating, comparatively, nor should such an endeavour be generally advised against.

The second argument for the revivification of Comparative Religion which Hedges proposes is based on a historical interpretation of religion(s) and interreligious relations. Here, it is pointed out that the history of religious traditions and religious encounters shows that religions are not and never have been, over the course of human history, what is sometimes referred to as 'cultural islands', but rather syncretic fusions of different influences and traditions. Instead of assuming that any attempt to identify connections between religious traditions is direct proof of one's disrespect for the distinct identity of each one of them, one could regard interreligious comparison also positively – as a useful and, in fact, appropriate method of analysing the complex issue of interrelations found between branches of individual traditions as well as between religious systems at large. He names the three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, on the one hand, and Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism as closely related Asian traditions, on the other hand, as two examples here, but also points to links between these two groups.

> 'Instead of understanding each religion as its own unique monolithic block, we have a shared history whereby each has been influencing the others over time. Certain links are easy to see: (…) Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism grew up in response to events in the early centuries CE, as what is known as Second Temple Judaism came to an end, and Islam developed its teachings in dialogue with both earlier traditions. Those traditions we term Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism likewise shared similar origins from debates and trends in South Asia (…) Movements between these two "groups" of religions also happened, and the legend of Josaphat and Barlaam is an example of a story that originated in India and ended up as a popular medieval fable, with the two central characters evolving from their historical origins as Gautama Buddha and one of his teachers into a Sufi master and disciple, and eventually into Christian saints included in the calendar of the Catholic Church.' (Hedges, 2016, 21-22).

What this reveals is that, even though observations like these may not be evidence of deep-seated influence between traditions, they demonstrate at the very least that religious ideas and stories were in movement, sometimes travelling across cultural and religious boundaries between Asia and Europe, and this in itself speaks against RS approaches that (over-)emphasise issues of particularity and difference. From my point of view, however, this does not mean that contrasts cannot play an equally important role in the comparative study of religions. Identifying 'links' between different (e.g. groups) of traditions, as Hedges suggests, can be viewed as a fairly neutral term, allowing for explorations of similarities and differences to the same extent. (See, for example, mind map 3, included in the appendix section 9.1: Supplementary Resources for Interreligious Comparison. As the map demonstrates, the links/connections that students could identify between Christian and Muslim views of the nature of God do not just reflect both aspects – similarity/difference – but also allow for in-depth explorations of the complexities of the two terms themselves, thus encouraging students to look for difference in similarity and similarity in difference.)

And finally, another reason to support the case of interreligious comparison, Hedges claims, can be found in what is sometimes termed the 'folk' or 'common-sense' notion of religion. Although acknowledging that 'religion' is a contested category of Western (mostly Christian) origin, whether used academically or in the context of everyday language (see Fitzgerald, 2000; Masuzawa, 2005; McCutcheon, 2003; compare section 5.2.3), he ascribes an important argumentative usefulness to the 'idea that certain areas of life (…) can be seen as related to something, somehow "set apart"', identifiable, for example, as 'the sacred' as Fitzgerald does in his postmodern critique of religion, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (2000) (Hedges, 2016, 23). Despite the fact that there are many issues with the usage of the term 'religion', it is arguable that 'some sense of religion as referring to the realm of cultural transactions where humanity relates to that which it perceives to be "the transcendent" (…) remains a meaningful category' (Hedges, 2016, 23). As I did earlier in my development of a believer-/life-centred interpretive lens for furthering theological understanding(s) in RE, Hedges, too, interprets the notion of transcendence very broadly as 'that which transcends the phenomenological *thisness* of life', which includes anything from 'the imminent, deities, endowing nature with spiritual intent' to 'speaking to ancestors' (Hedges, 2016, 23, emphasis in the text). Again, this has important implications for Comparative Religion:

> 'The fact that this is something common to (…) all human cultures and societies that have existed suggests that to view it in comparative ways makes sense, just as we will speak of "comparative politics" without suggesting that every society understands "politics" to mean it in the way that we see it, or even that they have an equivalent word, or comparative linguistics, without the sense that every language functions in similar ways or has words that directly equate to ours.' (Hedges, 2016, 23)

The analogy of Comparative Linguistics is particularly helpful here as it shows how issues of specificity, generalisability and comparability can find a good balance in comparative studies of different kinds. Just like learners of a new language will realise that certain new words cannot be directly translated back to their own mother tongue, which opens new ways of looking at the world to them, so too can those involved in the comparative study of religions discover new religious worlds and ways of exploring them precisely in that which is unique about individual traditions and possibly sets them apart from others (Hedges, 2016, 23). The argument that studying religions, comparatively, will automatically create disrespect for the particularities of religious traditions, e.g. by downplaying the significance of differences in belief and practice within interreligious relations, is therefore untenable.

Yet, there is another reason why interreligious comparison should be taken more seriously within the discipline of Religious Studies today (and Religious Education as I am arguing in this thesis), and this has to do with the interdisciplinary relationships of this academic field and its potential for collaboration with Theology and Comparative Theology in particular. Given that interreligious concerns are already central to both scholarly and lay types of theological practice[74], e.g. finding expression in interfaith study (such as Scriptural Reasoning) and dialogue, reintroducing comparative methods in Religious Studies could generate a shared, interdisciplinary interest, which might help to deconstruct the two disciplines' images from being polar and unconnected to being mutually enriching and relevant to each other (see Hedges, 2016, 18, 23-25; compare Cush, 1999). As argued in chapters 4 and 5, revisiting the questions of the disciplinary identities of Religious Studies and Theology as well as possible overlap and collaboration between the two is particularly important in the context of multi-faith RE in English schools without a religious designation where the (supposed) gulf between confessional Theology- and non-confessional Religious-Studies approaches has often been portrayed as practically unbridgeable (see sections 1.2, 1.3, 4.1.3, 5.1.2 and 5.2.3). This does not mean, however, that the two disciplines, which are also internally diverse, must interpret the differences and similarities between religious systems, uncovered by them in their corresponding comparative investigations, in the same way or that they ascribe the same meaning to them. Hedges argues:

> 'The importance the scholar of comparative religion attaches to such connections may, of course, be quite different from that of the comparative theologian or the insider. It is not necessary to see them as relating to a common hierophany (to use Eliade's term), or a strict identity of meanings or substance. Nevertheless, it does point to the fact, as argued above in relation to "religions" being meaningful categories of comparison, that those within the specific traditions understand and relate to each other as being engaged in work that may relate to some "transcendent" (however diversely conceptualized), and so in spheres of human cultural endeavour (…).' (Hedges, 2016, 25, insertions in the text)

This relates to an important argument made by another contributor to Schmidt-Leukel and Nehring's publication. Klaus von Stosch sees the question of truth (e.g. central to theologies modelled around the idea of faith seeking understanding) as a criterion to distinguish between Comparative Theology and Comparative Religion. Yet, even though Comparative Theology 'deals with the question of truth and examines how truth(s) can be testified to in different religious contexts' – explorations from which Comparative Religion refrains, the two areas of investigation share common goals in that they seek to compare different religious traditions without essentializing them, for instance (Stosch, 2016, 166).

It is possible to object, however, that there is a deeper layer of epistemological/methodological concerns hidden within all these arguments for the usefulness and significance of interreligious comparison in the study of religions that needs to be brought out more clearly. As we have seen, for example, quite a few different statements have been made by Hedges and Stosch, which could be summarised as:

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[74] See, for example: Blée, F. (2014); Cambrai, G. (2014); Gwynne, P. (2014); Levenson, J. (2012); Hedges, P. (2012); Clooney, F. (2010).

- X is similar to/identical with Y because both phenomena relate to something transcendent.
- X is similar to/identical with Y because humans, given their (e.g. biological/psychological) constitution, think, feel and behave in a limited number of ways and thus exhibit similar/identical responses to life.
- X is similar to/identical with Y because human thought, feeling, and behaviour influences other humans' thought, feeling and behaviour.

These statements however are a combination of ontological and empirical claims (the first being more ontological, the latter two being more empirical) which then leads to epistemological and methodological assumptions about how we know and understand the way the world is. From this perspective, the argument for interreligious comparative study could then be interpreted as one that is based, primarily, on the (ontological) assumption that there is something interreligious that is worthy of study; and what that 'something' is then leads to further debates about what discipline(s), fields of investigation (e.g. Religious Studies/Theology; Comparative Religion/Comparative Theology) are best placed to make sense of that 'thing'.

Yet, what I would say in response to such a criticism is that, even though it is true that Hedges's and Stosch's arguments may raise such ontological/epistemological questions, it is not necessary – in the case of the present study, at least – to engage in these deeper philosophical discussions, let alone identify a legitimate ontological basis for interreligious comparison to take place and be evaluated as useful in RE. This response is also closely related to Hypothesis 1 of this thesis (section 1.5) and the fact that the main justification for promoting an interreligious, theologically orientated focus in RE has been found in the subject's need for adequate representations of (here: theistic) religions. From this perspective, it was arguable (see section 4.2.2) that religions and spiritualities should be studied and taught because they are important phenomena in the world, and (to put the complex argument I proposed as simply as possible) a lack of knowledge and understanding of them would lead to a low level of general knowledge. If we apply this mainly empirical focus to the current debate, it might be sufficient to say that, *because connections and contact undoubtedly exist between religious traditions* (in interreligious encounters; in interfaith study and dialogue; in interreligious scholarship of Religious Studies and

Theology, etc.), it makes sense to study these links as one aspect of what religions are, namely highly complex, multifaceted and multi-dimensional phenomena that are interrelated in some ways and distinct from one another in others and hence, subject to being compared. In other words, the interreligious dimension of the phenomenon of religion explored in this chapter could be seen as one important aspect of 'what there is to know' about religion(s) and should therefore not be ignored in the study of religions, irrespective of the broader epistemological question of how we know and understand the world *per se*. (Other, more *directly student-centred* reasons for including comparative methods in RE have been given in section 6.2.)

This does not mean, however, that the above considerations do not raise a vital question for the project of the present study that touches upon issues of truth in the context of religion(s). Thus, one could ask, for example: if it is true that Comparative Religious Studies seeks ways of making comparisons outside of any (confessional) theological agenda (that is distinct from the theological interests of any particular religious tradition, as I suggest in this thesis), how can interreligious comparison nevertheless be applied to theological issues and subject matter in non-confessional RE in ways that respect the self-understanding of religions as bearers of truth, whilst also respecting the school subject's need for impartiality vis-à-vis religious truth claims. A few matters should be mentioned in reply to this question. First, whether or not one accepts the premise that Comparative Religion, e.g. in schools and HE institutions, does not have any confessional theological agenda, depends on how one defines 'confessionalism' and 'theology' in these particular academic settings. Following Barnes and Wright's objections to modern liberal RE (2006), one could claim that interreligious and/or comparative approaches ignoring questions of ultimate truth, e.g. with the intention of promoting an egalitarian view of religions as different cultural responses to the same ultimate reality (Hick), also have a religiously specific Christian, confessional agenda, namely one that is rooted in Western liberal Protestantism (see sections 3.3 and 7.2 below). As demonstrated in chapter 5, however, this criticism does not apply to my interreligious, theologically orientated approach because this project seeks to revivify theology and theology-centred interreligious comparison for educational, rather than theological reasons. Thus, it was argued in chapters 4 and 5 that furthering students' theological understanding(s) of theistic religions plays a crucial role in their development of religious literacy in relation to these traditions and should therefore be given greater attention in multi-faith Religious Education. The emphasis, in other words, is not on faith seeking understanding through theological exploration, but on understanding theistic faiths by choosing a theological focus in RE, which arguably includes understanding the ways in which faith traditions are connected with, and disconnected from, one another at different (here: conceptual/philosophical, doctrinal and practical) levels. This, I have argued, increases the chances of deep learning in RE as it enables students to develop a network of specific interreligious, theological subject knowledge that connects key theological concepts, beliefs and practices both at the level of individual religions (thereby revealing *intra*-connections) as well as between them (revealing *inter*-connections). Therefore, the only 'confessional' element identifiable in my approach is that it confesses to certain educational viewpoints and aims.

Moreover, the problem referred to in the second (concluding) part of the conditional question above – the difficulty of balancing RE's need for impartiality in matters of religious truth with equal respect for the self-understandings of religions as bearers of and paths to ultimate truth – has also been responded to in my interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach. In fact, the two main components of which it consists, outlined in chapters 5 and 6 respectively, address exactly this balance. On the one hand, I proposed to define theology mainly by its objects of study (as opposed to its methods), concentrating first and foremost on key theological concepts and teachings in different theistic traditions, and argued for the necessity of integrating such a content-centred practice of theology as one element within a broader interdisciplinary/multi-methodological approach to Religious Education. This makes it possible to promote a stronger focus on a wide range of theological subject matters in multi-faith RE – including potential intrareligious and interreligious connections within it – from a non-confessional (i.e. not from a faith-requiring or faith-asserting) perspective, applicable to all theistic religions studied in RE. On the other hand, to do justice to the centrality of transcendence in the lives of adherents of theistic traditions and hence, to the self-understandings of these religions, this content-focused approach to theology was also embedded in an existentially orientated interpretive framework promoting the study of believers' views of the divine and the meaningful relationships they express themselves to have with the divine. This second component thus counterbalances the strong interest in theological objects of study, concerned primarily with conceptual and doctrinal aspects of religion(s), with a life-centred view of what it means to be religious for believers in the divine that provides insight into the experiential realm of theistic belief or lived religion for that matter. It is this combination of two components in my approach (a concentration on theological content, embedded in a broader believer-focused interpretive framework) which allows authentic expressions of ultimate truth to be heard, investigated and, if desired, compared in RE, without crossing the line to confessional thinking.

Like Hedges, I therefore draw the following conclusion regarding the links between Comparative Theology and Comparative Religion: since there is no doubt that meaningful connections take place across religious worlds in the activity of certain traditions, students of RS, both at university and at school level, should be able to investigate these connections, e.g. through comparative methods, that many religious practitioners already believe exist (see Hedges, 2016, 24) – as long as this is done cautiously and with respect for the self-understanding(s) of individual religions.

In the next and final two sections of this chapter, I will therefore move on to the question of how this valuable practice of interreligious comparison (here: of theological content, specifically) can be done in a way that balances issues of universality and particularity in the study of religions in schools. To do so, I will first (re-)consider and further analyse the problems of essentialism/relativism which I identified in Teece's soteriological view of religions, so as to be able to show why it is so important to *bracket* ontological questions, including those of the salvific quality of religions, at a methodological level in RE (section 7.2). The final part of this thesis will then relate these findings back to my own interreligious approach to theology, demonstrating specifically how it achieves this balance, both at the level of theory and practice (section 7.3).

## 7.2 (Re-)Consideration of Teece's Soteriological Framework for RE With Regard to the Risks of Essentialism/Relativism

Having established that comparative methods are worth integrating into the study of (theological content of) theistic religions in schools for the simple reason that they from part of our understanding of what religions are and thus contribute to deep learning in Religious Education, I will now reconsider the one, currently existing, theoretical/philosophical framework that comes closest to my own vision of an interreligious, transcendence-orientated focus in RE. What I mean by this is that this framework, too, might enable students to study theistic religions both *systematically* and with the potential for *comparison*. As explained at the start of this chapter, the pedagogical stance proposed for the context of multi-faith RE in Britain that best fulfils these criteria (at the time of writing) is Teece's soteriological model for teaching and learning in RE (Teece, 2008, 2010b, 2012) as it is both interreligious (specifically designed for an exploration of all major religions) and concerned with the study of concepts and doctrines related to ultimate reality in particular, which gives it a potentially theological orientation when applied exclusively to theistic religions (as I suggest in this study; see section 6.1). The aim of this further analysis of Teece's model for RE is to identify what I see as a problematic shortcoming of soteriology-centred (theological) approaches and to reveal how my own proposition for an interreligious and RE-specific vision for theology, by contrast, might help to overcome this difficulty by choosing a similar focus as Teece does (God-centredness in the lives of believers), but disconnecting it, at a theoretical level, from the question of the salvific power of religions. As a next step in this final part of the whole discussion, I will therefore summarise, reconsider and, to some extent, further develop both Teece's soteriological approach itself as well as the main RE-specific criticisms it faces from the perspective of Critical Realism (see Barnes & Wright, 2006).

As explained in chapter 3 (section 3.3), Teece proposes an explanatory framework for the study of religions in RE based, conceptually, on Hick's pluralist interpretation of religion which sees religious traditions primarily as vehicles for salvation/liberation or human spiritual 'transformation' (Hick, 1973, 1989). The starting point for teaching RE from such a soteriological point of view is Hick's so called 'Irenaean intuition', according to which all post-axial religions interpret the human condition, in one way or another, as unsatisfactory in its essence and hence, in need of transformation (Teece, 2012, 257). This transformation, Teece summarises, occurs when human beings succeed in overcoming what Hick refers to as 'self- or ego-centredness' and turn their existence towards 'a supreme object of value' (Reality-centredness), promising spiritual salvation (in the case of Abrahamic religions) or liberation (in the case of Eastern belief systems) (Teece, 2012, 257). What students may gain from adopting Hick's soteriological lens in RE, according to Teece, is therefore an understanding of religions as 'human responses to the transcendent' (Hick, 1989), which can be built, systematically, around a fairly simple narrative structure. Teece offers one example for each of the six major religions studied in RE (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism) (see Teece, 2008, 2012), of which we already considered Sikhism in chapter 3. For reasons of comparability, I will include Sikhism again here and add a second example – Islam – below. These are the narratives students could use to explore and interpret the soteriological dimensions of the two traditions, according to Teece:

- The reason why Sikhs tend to regard human existence as unsatisfactory is that it involves suffering, which is caused by our spiritual blindness – *avidya*. Moreover, *avidya* and *maya* (illusion) cause the condition known as *haumai*, which means ego-, or self-centredness. A person who is subject to *haumai* is described as *manmukh*, someone who focuses on the self rather than the great Guru or God. According to Guru Nanak, the first guru in the line of the ten living gurus of Sikhism, it is *haumai* which controls human beings to such an extent that it binds them more firmly to the wheel of transmigration. To achieve liberation, Sikhs must therefore follow a path of *nam simran* (the practice of keeping God constantly in mind) and *sewa* (selfless service) and develop the spiritual condition of *gurmukh* (God-centredness), which ultimately leads to the state of *mukhti* or liberation.

- For Muslims, in comparison, the unsatisfactory nature of life is found in the state of human forgetfulness (*ghafala*) of the perfect qualities of God (i.e. mercy, love and compassion, etc.), which can only be overcome by obedience to the will of Allah through inward and outward religious practice, such as remembering the ninety-nine names of Allah, understanding the absolute oneness of God, *tawhid*, and practicing what is commonly referred to as the Five Pillars of Islam: *shahada* (the declaration of faith: 'There is no God but God and Muhammad is his Prophet'), *salat* (prayer or worship), *zakat* (alms-giving), *sawm* (fasting during the month of Ramadan) and *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). (Summaries based, loosely, on Teece, 2012, 103-104, 261-262)

One might therefore conclude, using similarly structured narratives like these (in this case: structured around the idea of the salvific power of religions to transform people from being ego-centred to Reality-centred in their lives) has two advantages. First, it may help students to learn and understand key aspects of individual religions (e.g. concepts, teachings and practices), systematically, and even more importantly, perhaps, to do so in ways that reveal logical internal connections between those aspects. And second, given its applicability to all major religions, this approach offers opportunities for interreligious comparisons in multi-faith Religious Education, adding an extra dimension of interrelatedness to the network of (here: theological) subject knowledge developed in this way, namely one that also identifies conceptual/doctrinal/practical links across religious boundaries. What such a soteriological lens might therefore reveal, as a positive result of such investigations, are criteria for Reality-centred or, in the case of theistic religions, specific theological subject-content selection.

In my critical analysis of this soteriological framework for RE in chapter 3, I mentioned two sets of objections of which only the former was discussed at length – general criticisms aimed at Hick's religious pluralism, on the one hand (Cottingham, 2005; D'Costa, 1996; Loughlin, 1990; MacGrane, 1989; MacIntyre, 1985; Rowe, 1999; Ward, 2018), and one RE-specific objection coming from critical realists Barnes and Wright (2006). In what follows, I will first summarise briefly, and then expand on, my criticism of Hick's pluralism, which I refer to as 'the problem of difference' in the (comparative) study of religions, and then move on to a more detailed analysis of the RE-specific debate. These two steps will help me, in the final part of this chapter (section 7.3), to set this analysis in relation to my own interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach to RE and to reveal how it is better equipped to keep questions of similarity and difference in a good balance.

The main problem with Hick's view of religion(s), I have argued, is that it has essentialising and to some extent, relativizing tendencies, due to the particular type of religious pluralism on which it is based. Using D'Costa's system of categorization (D'Costa, 2009, 5), I identified this pluralism as 'unitary' in nature since it aims to articulate an essential unity between the world religions by showing that they all share common beliefs (e.g. about the purpose of life found in human spiritual transformation), even if they are expressed, experienced and practised differently in different cultural contexts. That there is, in fact, such a unitary element in Hick's pluralism is visible in his use of the Kantian type distinction between the *noumenon* and the *phenomenon* introduced in Kant's *Critique of Pure*

*Reason* (2005). Like Kant, who distinguishes between reality as it is in itself (the noumenon) and reality as perceived by a subject (the phenomenon), Hick differentiates between the Real *an sich* (the Real in itself or ultimate reality) and the Real as variously understood by different religions (Hick, 1989, 236-240). He does so to argue for the pluralist hypothesis that all religions in the world, while certainly being the product of collective human attempts to know the noumenon, only manage to construct partially adequate understandings of the Real *an sich* in their own cultural terms (Hick, 1989, 236-240). In other words, even though the Real in itself is presupposed in religious experience according to Hick, what people actually experience when engaging in their particular religious practices, for instance, is only one form or another of the phenomenal Real – the Real as humanly thought or experienced. However, what all these responses to the Real have in common, thus creating a certain unity between them, is that they reflect human striving for Reality-centredness, which, in turn, has the salvific potential of leading to spiritual transformation.

Some critics have argued that this point of view is not necessarily relativistic in the sense that Hick relativizes the significance of religious differences and conflicts for the sake of creating an artificial unity between religions because Hick's theory includes the possibility of varying levels of salvific capacity within and between religions and also identifies ethical criteria each tradition needs to meet to count as a valid and authentic human response to the one ineffable Real (Hick, 1989, 299-315). Another reply to the charges of relativism put forward by D'Costa (1996) and MacGrane (1989), for example, has been offered by Mary Anne Stenger (2011) who distinguishes between 'pure' types of relativism and what could be seen as milder versions of it, by contrast. Thus, Stenger objects that Hick is by no means a pure relativist of religions because, even though 'for Hick the Real in itself grounds religious experiences of varying kinds', there can be 'only one ultimate, not a plurality of ultimates' (Stenger 2011, 170). This one Real in itself, she therefore insists, is the one absolute in Hick's hypothesis, which effectively 'prevent[s] a pure relativism' (Stenger, 2011, 170). This objection, however, does not convince me, entirely, because the only contribution it makes to the debate on relativity is that it might keep Hick from being a relativist about the nature of absolute reality/transcendence (a type of relativism I would not expect from someone who postulates that there is a singular ultimate reality, anyway, as this would require them not to believe in an absolute truth); the charge of *cultural relativism regarding practical religious differences*, however, remains unaffected. I therefore conclude, that even though the extent to which Hick's religious pluralism is relativistic may be debatable, there undeniably remains an element of essentialist reductionism in it (i.e. reducing religious differences to the lowest, or from his perspective, perhaps, 'highest', common denominator, here: human striving for Reality-centredness), which is particularly problematic (as I will show below) when it is linked, interpretatively, to questions of the salvific quality of religions. One of the first scholars who criticized the reductiveness of unitary theories of pluralism was MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (1985). The most serious problem involved in pluralism, as he sees it, is that this theory (although having transformed the Christian salvation problematic from the question of *if* people from other faiths can be saved to reflections on *how* they might be, e.g. despite or through their non-Christian beliefs) still focuses too much on the salvation of the other while ignoring completely the theological significance of otherness (MacIntyre, 1985, 205; compare section 3.3). Here, I would argue: although this is a particularly Christian (inclusivist) interpretation of soteriology that may not accord with Hick's theory of human transformation, MacIntyre's appeal to the significance of otherness is an important one to consider, regardless of the religious background from which it comes. If we imagine entering into dialogue with someone who assumes, on the basis of their personal faith, that they have an understanding of Reality as it is (the noumenon) and we responded to them that that was just reality as they perceived it (the phenomenon), it is hard to see how such a (Hickian) position would be a good starting point for genuine dialogue and in-depth mutual understanding.[75]

The charges of relativism/essentialism have also been raised against Teece's Hick-inspired approach to multi-faith RE of religion(s), which leads us to an important RE-specific criticism of Teece. As indicated briefly in chapter 3, Barnes and Wright (2006) argue that Teece's soteriological framework for RE, involves a new form of confessionalism. In particular, they see Teece's view of RE as highly confessional in the sense that it preaches the virtues of Western liberal Protestantism to the exclusion of more traditional exclusivist or inclusivist interpretations of religion (Barnes & Wright, 2006, 65-67). For them, the main problem in Teece's approach is that it keeps focusing on religious experience as a common way of knowing the Real, thereby ignoring the significance of conflicting truth claims and particular doctrines – in short, the irreducible differences that exist both between and within religions worldwide. This tendency, which they identify as an expression of post-

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[75] The argument presented in this paragraph consists of an extract, to some extent paraphrased, from my Master's dissertation: Interfaith Dialogue and the Significance of Difference: Considering Legenshausen's Non-reductive Pluralism as a Basis for Muslim-Christian Dialogue (Pfaff, 2014).

Enlightenment Romanticism, is traced back to 'Hick's appeal to the ineffability of the religious object', the noumenon that makes itself known to believers only through the phenomenal realm of experience (Barnes & Wright, 2006, 71). This has a disadvantage: although allowing Hick to focus on what he sees as the common core of all religions – their salvific potential to teach people the way to Reality-centredness – this soteriological approach also invites the dangers of universalism, by falsely assuming that conceptual similarities between religions are all that matters:

> 'The suggestion that adherents of the different religions […] are encountering one and the same spiritual object seems implausible, precisely because there is no common or broadly similar description of that object. There is virtually no belief common to the religions; it is difference rather than similarity which is more striking.' (Barnes & Wright, 2006, 70-71).

Drawing on Christian (1987), Barnes and Wright therefore conclude that Teece's approach, centring also upon the transformative quality of religious belief as a common conceptual basis of all religions, misrepresents religions in the classroom 'as not in competition with each other', which falsifies 'the self-understanding of most religious adherents' (Barnes & Wright, 2006, 72). What this model for RE fails to offer, one might then conclude, is a genuine appreciation of the differences in beliefs, doctrines and practices that exist both within as well as between religions worldwide.

One could reply[76] to this critical realist view of RE, as Teece himself does, that it is based on quite a significant misinterpretation of Hick's Philosophy of Religion. First, Hick cannot be seen as a theological romantic because it is a logical consequence of his epistemology to justify the rationality of religious belief by the mere fact that people have religious experiences, regardless of the question of the religious ambiguity of the universe presupposed in his theory (Hick, 1989, 210; Teece, 2005, 32). His pluralism should therefore be classified as an expression of critical realist thinking rather than romantic theology. Moreover, Hick's central thesis that all religious people experience the same divine reality does not imply that all experiences of that reality are also *identical* (Teece, 2005, 31). Given that the phenomenal realm of experience, through which the ineffable Real is perceived, is uniquely individual in its manifestations, experiences of the transcendent are *by their very nature* diverse and generate differences in belief and practice. Therefore, it is wrong to assume that, for Hick, 'it is no longer important if the doctrinal systems of different world faiths [are in] conflict with one another' or that all religions are equally salvific paths to Reality-centredness (Wright in Teece, 2005, 31). The sole reason why Hick suggests that it is sensible to assume partial truth in all religions is that questions of spiritual superiority of one tradition over another could only be answered from a non-human 'standpoint of omniscience', which makes it logically necessary to argue for this form of 'ontological pluralism' (Akbari, 2009; Teece, 2005, 32). Yet, such a reply – one might further philosophise – fails to acknowledge RE's need for impartiality (here: vis-à-vis ontological questions) as it engages in discussions which are clearly undertaken from religious 'insider' perspectives and hence, not an appropriate basis for methodological reflections in Religious Education. Here, one could point to the problem that many of the discussions of Hick's writings appear to have come from religious insiders (especially Christian theologians) who fail to identify the religious particularity of the metaphysical claims Hick is making by trying to integrate them in, or reject them on the basis of, their (Christian) soteriological truth claims. Although, from a theological point of view, this may be an interesting and meaningful discussion to have, it is less clear how the insights drawn from it are relevant to non-confessional, multi-faith RE which – as I established in section 6.2.1 – should always be based, methodologically, on a procedural agnosticism that *brackets* exactly those questions of truth around which the discussion revolves.

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[76] The argument presented in this paragraph consists of an extract, to some extent paraphrased, from earlier coursework: Schmidt, A. (2014). What is Religious about 'Religious Education'? PGCE Specialist Subject Knowledge and Pedagogy Module. University of Exeter.

Nevertheless, one could conclude, the assumption that soteriological frameworks will automatically overemphasise that which unites rather than separates religions or makes them particular is too general and undifferentiated to be accepted here. The whole debate about the significance of questions of similarity and difference within Religious Education, as I will show in the final section, is much more a matter of *balance* than choice, regardless of which theory is being applied as a philosophical basis. Barnes and Wright seem to consider a strong focus on truth and the resulting differences in belief as the only appropriate perspective from which to teach Religious Education. Teece, by contrast, could be interpreted as underestimating the role of differing accounts of religious experience as they are not essential to his overall interpretation of religion 'as something that is transformative of human experience from self-centredness to Reality-centredness' (Teece, 2005, 34). So, in a way, both parties can be criticised for choosing one side of the coin when there is really no need for a choice. How to create a better balance between questions of universality and particularity, here: in the comparative study of theistic religions, *whilst maintaining the focus on God-/Reality-centredness in the lives of believers*, is therefore the final task of this discussion.

## 7.3 Questions of Universality and Particularity in the Study of Religions in Schools: Finding the Right Balance

I have claimed above that my alternative theologically orientated approach to RE, designed for the context of religiously unaffiliated schools, has the capacity to overcome problems of essentialism and relativism (thus also avoiding imbalances between questions of universality/similarities and particularity/differences in the study of religions) both at a theoretical and practical level. To explain this, I will start with the theoretical side of the argument. Several elements in my proposition for a content-based view of theology (see section 5.2) and interpretive framework, structured around the idea of the centrality of transcendence in the lives of believers (see section 6.2), are crucial to this endeavour. For example, my assertion that theology in RE should be viewed as the study of the idea of the transcendent/divine, as articulated by adherents of different theistic traditions and of the meaningful relationships these people express themselves to have with the divine (explored through a special focus on key theological concepts and teachings), is hardly essentialist, or at least not to an unacceptable degree. Instead of reducing religions and religious differences down to a common core, e.g. for the purpose of creating an artificial unity between them (as Hick's soteriological framework has been accused of doing, see criticisms above), I use the concept of Reality-centredness – reformulated here as 'God-centredness' given the theistic context – in a rather less controversial way, namely divorced from questions of the salvific quality and spiritual functions of religious traditions. As argued in section 6.2, defining theology not as the study of God (*theos*) or the divine more generally, but as the study of people's views of God/the divine, assures that the critical distance between student and the object of study, the divine, is maintained in RE, which is a necessary condition theology must fulfil to be compatible with the non-confessional, multi-faith nature of the subject. This shifts our focus away from the soteriological question of if, how or to what extent different religious paths lead to human spiritual transformation (if at all) – a question which involves a metaphysical assumption closely related to issues of ultimate truth and the (un-)reality of God's existence that would be inappropriate to make in non-confessional RE. Instead, the believer-/life-centred framework proposed in this thesis remains impartial to such questions of ultimate reality and truth by adopting, at a methodological level, what was referred to as 'procedural agnosticism' in section 6.2.1.

It is this separation of my identification of an 'essence' or core which all theistic religions possess (a certain God-orientation visible in the lives of their adherents) and the potential soteriological dimension of this feature that makes my theologically orientated approach – I would argue – only essentialist to a very limited degree, if at all, in its methodological construction. This has to do with the definition of theism I provided in chapter 1 and my reasons for selecting it. Since belief in some type of God, gods or ultimate reality (summarised by me in the term: the divine) is undoubtedly the defining feature of theism, it is not at all controversial to single out this aspect of theistic religion(s) as a common focus and/or starting point in the study of these traditions. At least, this is true, one might add, as long as the aim of choosing such a focus is not to imply that all variations of this God-centredness existing in this world (visible in the multitude of theological concepts and teachings as well as people's diverse views and experiences of the divine) are essentially the same or that learning about differences in beliefs and practice and specificities of individual faith traditions are not crucial to understanding (theistic) religion(s).

Yet, there are other theoretical reasons why this 'mild' essentialism (as I defined it above) is less problematic than the one underlying Hick's unitary pluralism. As I have stressed throughout this thesis, it is not my intention to suggest that studying theistic traditions, let alone all religions and worldviews encountered in RE classrooms, through the lens of God – or the concept of God-centredness (in the lives of believers) – is the only or best lens to use in Religious Education. What I have argued, conversely, is that adopting a theology-centred viewpoint in RE, e.g. as part of a broader multi-methodological approach, is crucial to the task of furthering adequate (i.e. God-centred) understanding(s) of theistic religions in RE in schools without a religious affiliation, which, in turn, is a necessary requirement for the wider development of students' religious literacy in relation to these religions. Furthermore, given that my approach works with a combination of different conceptualisations of what it means to be religious – i.e. a view of being religious as having propositional beliefs, adhering to doctrines and searching for ultimate truth, combined with a view of being religious as a particular mode of (here: God-orientated) human existence – there is no reason to fear that any one of these conceptions overrides the others, thereby leading to a one-sided, simplistic interpretation of the phenomenon of religion as such. Pointing out the need for an interreligious, transcendence-orientated focus in non-confessional, multi-faith RE, to be chosen temporarily and for the specific purpose of promoting theological understanding(s) of different theistic religions, is therefore, by no means, an essentialist/relativist attempt to provide an overall interpretation of (theistic) religion, in the singular, or to ignore the significance of difference and particularity in the (comparative) study of (here: theistic) religions, in the plural form.

These points (avoidance of essentialism/relativism) are demonstrated most clearly in the examples I gave in the previous chapter of a possible practical application of my approach (see section 6.2.4). This leads us to the practical side of the argument introduced above – that the alternative sector-specific vision of theology I promote in this thesis (i.e. theology as a non-confessional study of key theological concepts and teachings, with a potential for interreligious comparison) is capable of solving the problems of essentialism and relativism not only at the level of theory, but also in practice. Here, one could point to the interpretive framework I developed above. To help students discover particular views of the divine in different theistic religions in combination with a more general interreligious conceptual/doctrinal understanding of theistic belief, I suggested four broad areas of God-centred investigation, each of which can be explored through a variety of media ranging from direct contact with representatives of theistic religions and worldviews, and texts or audio and video sources, to material objects. These areas of investigation were: first, different believers' explicit and implicit definitions, conceptions and expressed understandings of the nature of the divine. Second, their accounts of the relationship they have with the divine in their everyday lives (e.g. the views, beliefs, practices and experiences they articulate in this context). Third, the ways in which these believers (intend to) lead their individual and communal lives as a result of their orientation towards the divine. And fourth, their explanations of why they seek to lead such God-centred lives, e.g. for which practical purpose(s) and/or for which higher end(s). The practice of studying different views of the divine in this way, it is arguable then, balances issues of universality and particularity in the study of religions insofar as it encourages RE students to discover, whilst using 'orientation towards the divine' as a common focal point in their interreligious, theology-centred explorations (universal aspect), also a variety of specific manifestations/interpretations of what it means to have a theistic faith for adherents of individual faith traditions in different cultural contexts and times (particularistic perspective). Rather than relativizing the significance of differences in belief and practice found both within and between religious traditions, this approach seeks to instil in students of RE an awareness of the great complexity, as well as (internal/external) diversity, of theistic faith traditions.

This becomes even more apparent when reconsidering the examples of teaching strategies/resources for interreligious comparison included in this thesis (see Scriptural Reasoning example in section 6.2.4 and appendix 9.2 and mind maps for interreligious comparison in appendix 9.1) with regard to the question of how to establish a balance between aspects of universality and particularity in Comparative Religion. The example of how students might compare Christian and Muslim views of the nature of God/Allah shows, for instance, that it is very well possible for students of RE to investigate different conceptions of the divine with a particular view to identifying potential (e.g. philosophical/conceptual) interrelations existing across religious boundaries, without losing sight of the differences and particularities that make both religions unique and might therefore be best considered outside the comparative paradigm as well. It should also be noted, in this context, that even those connections (see, for example, colourful lines in mind map 3 in appendix 9.1) which students might draw using the paradigm of interreligious similarity (e.g. attributes of God/Allah), could still be used as a focus for further comparative investigation and differentiation, in particular. Thus, it is arguable that research into an apparent commonality such as the Christian (Biblical) description of God as 'Light' in 1 John 1:5 and the Muslim (Qu'ranic) description of Allah as 'the Light of the Heavens and earths' in Surah 24:35, despite their use of the same metaphor, could also reveal important differences in how the image of light is used and interpreted in the given religions. Further research into Christian understandings of the term 'light' might, for example, disclose links with moral guidance; spiritual insight and salvation through the blood of Christ, also described as 'the Light of the world' (see John 8:12) and hence, also with God's self-manifestation in Christ (see Hahn, 1976, 484). And closer considerations of Muslim interpretations of the term, by contrast, might reveal a connection with the creation account of Allah's physical illumination of heaven and earth, which in turn provides insight into further dissimilarities between Muslim and Christian views of the divine, namely the conception of Allah as the sole and all-powerful Creator (who does not have any partners or sons) versus the Triune God in Christianity (see Dodds, 2019, 55-58 and Thomas, 2004, 73). It is therefore important to keep in mind that aspects (here: conceptual) of two religions which appear to be similar at one level can sometimes nevertheless be dissimilar at another level, e.g. when exposed to deeper types of comparative investigation (see appendix 9.1 for more information).

I therefore conclude, finding the right balance when trying to tackle issues of universality and particularity in this (comparative) study of the theological dimensions of religions (e.g. understanding 'light' as a universal spiritual metaphor versus making sense of different religious interpretations and applications of it) is itself a balancing act. Apart from the need to weigh up both the benefit and adequacy of interreligious comparisons of theological content at any given moment in the learning process, in which case the main stress may often be on simple similarities and differences within and between theistic traditions, students must also engage in a second – or meta-level – process of further differentiation. This additional balancing act involves, for instance, the development of high-level cognitive skills such as finding difference in similarity and similarity in difference and being aware of the possibility of varying degrees of generalisability, specification, comparison and differentiation (here: of various theological content), all of which may be helpful to gaining theological understanding(s) at different times in RE learning, e.g. initial familiarisation with the methods of interreligious comparison versus later-stage elaboration. This is why Scriptural Reasoning exercises, which by their very nature already balance respect for theological agreement and disagreement through a constant interest in further multi-perspective, theological explorations, were recommended, specifically, in chapter 6 (section 6.2.4) of this thesis. It is in these ways, which I have termed the methods of 'careful comparison' above, that my interreligious and theologically orientated approach intends to enable students of non-confessional, multi-faith RE to understand the phenomenon of theistic belief(s) more deeply: namely, by familiarising themselves with the theological content of several theistic traditions; by learning to articulate what these religions may have in common; whilst also being aware of (potentially incomparable) particularities in belief and practice that make each religious tradition unique. (This brings us to the final part of this thesis, the overall conclusion of this philosophical discussion.)

# 8 Conclusion

This concluding chapter is divided into three main parts: conclusions, contributions to knowledge and recommendations. The first part (section 8.1) has a theoretical focus in that it summarises the main arguments I proposed and the conclusions I drew in this thesis as a result of my critical analysis and dialogic philosophical argumentation, relating them back also to the overall research focus and five individual research objectives introduced in chapter 1. In the second part of the chapter (section 8.2), I will explain (drawing on section 1.7 of the introduction) how I see the particular contributions my thesis makes in the disciplinary fields of Religious Education, Education and the Philosophy of Religious Education, in particular, as well as Religious Studies and Theology. And the final section (8.3) will then summarise the main recommendations and suggestions I made, as a result of this philosophical discussion for a potential practical application of my interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach to RE in schools without a religious affiliation. In this context, I will also offer a list of success criteria, based on the arguments made in this thesis, for using my theologically orientated approach most constructively in non-confessional, multi-faith RE and point to the need for further research into the roles of theology and theological understanding(s) in British Religious Education today. (Where appropriate and possible, I will also make reference to relevant individual research objectives in sections 8.2 and 8.3, thus indicating how the contributions and recommendations I make are related to the research tasks and aims set out at the start of this thesis.)

## 8.1 Summary of Conclusions

Given the considerable complexity of the philosophical argument proposed in this thesis, it is helpful to structure this summary into two complementary parts: major arguments and conclusions versus sub-arguments and sub-conclusions. This is not to imply that individual argumentative components are disconnected from one another, but that some of them are less central to my main research focus than others and/or that certain parts (e.g. sub-premises and sub-conclusions) of the overall argument belong together and are therefore best understood in combination with one another. For this reason, as a second layer of systematisation, I will also relate each of these individual components back to the research aims of this thesis. Let us therefore return, briefly, to my overall research aim and individual research objectives (IRO, hereafter) which I listed in section 1.6 of the introduction. Reconsidering, specifically, the five IRO will enable us to see how exactly all the constituent elements of my core argument (for a stronger focus on theological content in multi-faith RE) function, individually, as argumentative strands in my thesis, whilst also being interlinked in the whole process of argumentation. (See numbered IRO in parentheses in the following list as well as respective insertions in the main text below.)

- **Overall Research Aim(s)**
    - To argue the case for a **stronger focus on theological content in non-confessional, multi-faith Religious Education** – and:
    - To re-establish the **development of students' theological understanding(s)** (defined here, primarily, as understandings of theological content) as an important aim in multi-faith RE in schools without a religious affiliation.

- **Individual Research Objectives (IRO)**

(i) To examine the **disciplinary relationship between Theology** and non-confessional, multi-faith **Religious Education** (as well as **Religious Studies**, more broadly) and to assess, in particular, the validity of the argument that the task of promoting theological understanding(s) – in the variety of ways in which it can be understood – and the values of non-confessional RE are incompatible with each other **(IRO 1)**

(ii) To explore the **potential role(s**) a **theologically orientated approach** to RE, focused on the study of key theological content of different theistic religions, could play **in developing students' religious literacy** (in relation to theistic religions) as a broader aim of RE **(IRO 2)**

(iii) To assess the **extent to which** already existing, **theology-centred approaches** can be evaluated as **suitable for** the context of **non-confessional, multifaith RE** and, if relevant and possible, identify areas in which they would need to be modified or further developed to overcome potential limitations **(IRO 3)**

(iv) To identify the **conditions** a **theologically orientated approach needs to fulfil** to overcome potential limitations of other approaches and thus be **compatible with** the principles and values of **non-confessional, multi-faith RE** as it is found in schools without a religious affiliation **(IRO 4)**

(v) And to provide an **interpretive framework**, including **criteria for its successful use in non-confessional RE**, for furthering students' theological understanding(s) (here: of theological content such as concepts, teachings and practices relating to the divine) in different theistic religions, which **overcomes** the (apparent) **compatibility problem (IRO 5)**.

What is important to realise about these objectives is that, although representing individual research aims, they also constitute – as a whole, so to speak – a list of items with a particular internal, logical structure, reflecting crucial aspects of the arguments and sub-arguments made in this thesis. Thus, one could summarise, IRO 1 is primarily concerned with the background situation from which this research emerged, namely the complicated disciplinary relationship of Theology and non-confessional Religious Education and the question of potential (in-)compatibility between the two, identified in relevant research literature. Implying that arguments for a general irreconcilability between Theology and RE can be dismissed, IRO 2 is concerned with the role theological understanding(s) might play in students' learning and more specifically, their development of religious literacy (in relation to theistic religions), thus connecting the general philosophical questions of compatibility/usefulness of theology with the central concerns of current literacy-focused debates in RE. IRO 3 then prepares us for a closer examination of the conditions theology might have to fulfil to be suitable for non-confessional educational settings such as schools without a religious affiliation (see IRO 4) by analysing, first, the extent to which existing theology-centred approaches can (or cannot) be seen as adequate responses to the (perceived) compatibility problem mentioned above. And the final objective, IRO 5, focuses on the specific solution to this problem, developed in this thesis as a result of the research steps required for an achievement of the preceding objectives (IRO 1-4).

Given the different focal points of these objectives, however, there is yet another way of classifying them in a systematic way, which helps us to structure this summary of conclusions. Whilst IRO 1 deals with the background to the study (thus concentrating on underlying assumptions or potentially unstated premises in the examined argument for a general incompatibility between Theology and RE), IRO 2 and 4 form the heart of the philosophical argument proposed in this thesis in that they consider the positive role theology may play in developing students' religious literacy and (drawing on insights from the discussion triggered by IRO 3) identify subject-specific criteria necessary for such a disciplinary contribution. In an attempt to propose an approach that meets these requirements in a way that maximises the distinctive contribution Theology can make to non-confessional RE (i.e. alongside and in collaboration with other disciplines), IRO 5 then hints at theoretical and practical solutions to the (apparent) compatibility problem, thus anticipating some of the major conclusions developed in this thesis. For these reasons, the following summary of arguments and conclusions focuses first on the responses my thesis gave, specifically, in the process of achieving IRO 2, 4 and 5 – the objectives that are most concerned with my own core argument(s).

- **Summary of Main Arguments and Conclusions (Theoretical Level)**

The most central arguments made in this thesis all relate, in one way or another, to the guiding question of this philosophical discussion: what are the conditions that theology would have to fulfil to be (more) suitable for the context of non-confessional, multi-faith RE in schools without a religious affiliation? (The adjective 'suitable' was defined here in terms of the discipline's compatibility with such subject values as impartiality vis-à-vis certain ontological questions/questions of religious truth as well as tolerance of a plurality of perspectives.) The first major conclusion drawn in this context was that theology, to be adequate for such non-confessional, educational settings, should follow **three principles**:

(i) The practice of furthering theological understanding(s) in multi-faith RE in schools without a religious affiliation should be construed as an academic study of key theological concepts and teachings of different theistic religions that does not presuppose faith in the divine on the part of the students – in other words: a non-confessional practice that defines theology mainly by its objects of study (rather than methods) and is applicable to all monotheistic and polytheistic religions studied in RE **(IRO 4)**.

(ii) The aim of developing students' theological understanding(s) in this way – defined as understanding(s) of theological content of different theistic religions – should be viewed as an important aspect of becoming religiously literate in relation to theistic religions, but not as the essence of religious literacy/understanding as such **(IRO 2, IRO 4)**.

(iii) The practice of exploring theological content of theistic religions should not be thought of as the only, let alone best, way into deepening learning in RE, but rather as an important part of a broader multi-methodological, interdisciplinary approach to the study of religions that looks at the defining feature of theistic religions: belief in the divine **(IRO 2, IRO 4)**.

As a next step, in its efforts to provide an acceptable theoretical basis for an interreligious approach to theology/theological content that meets these requirements, this thesis sought to embed this content-based view of theology in a broader hermeneutical framework that assumes the centrality of transcendence in religious belief, which – in the case of theistic religions – manifests itself in an orientation towards the divine in the personal/communal lives of believers. This, it was argued, has the advantage that the resulting transcendence-orientated approach to theology balances conceptual/doctrinal conceptualisations of theistic religions with a more, believer-/life-centred view of theistic belief, understood as the believer's experience of standing in a meaningful relationship with the divine. This led me to the following **interreligious, transcendence-orientated interpretations of theology**: first, theology is the study of the idea of the transcendent (understood as an umbrella term encompassing all notions of the divine or other forms of ultimate reality) as it has been articulated by adherents of different monotheistic and polytheistic traditions and worldviews in different cultural contexts and times, and of the meaningful relationships these believers express themselves to have with the transcendent in their personal and communal lives **(IRO 5)**. Second, interreligious theology, as defined in this study, must keep a critical distance from its objects of study (including God/the divine) by investigating and trying to understand people's *views and ideas* of the divine, as opposed to investigating and trying to understand the divine itself **(IRO 4, IRO 5)**. And third, interreligious theology must be based, *methodologically*, on a procedural agnosticism that remains impartial vis-à-vis ontological questions/questions of religious truth and in particular vis-à-vis belief and disbelief in God, whilst at the same time allowing students to approach the study of theistic belief(s) from whichever *personal* positions they wish, including theist, agnostic and atheist ones **(IRO 4, IRO 5)**.

The significance of these pedagogical choices was justified as follows: choosing this combined content-based/life-centred view of theology (as one element in a broader multi-methodological, interdisciplinary approach to RE) enables students to explore the complexity of theistic belief, systematically and with the potential for 'careful' interreligious comparison, which neither crosses the line to confessionalism, nor disrespects the self-understanding(s) and specificities of individual faith traditions. And (it was claimed) this discussion is particularly important today because current literacy-focused propositions for RE (see Clarke and Woodhead, 2015; Dinham and Shaw, 2016; CoRE 2018) pay little attention to the role theological understanding(s) may play in developing religious literacy as a broader aim of RE.

- **Summary of Main Sub-Arguments and Sub-Conclusions (Theoretical Level)**

This brings us to some of the arguments and conclusions that may have been less central to the main propositions made in this thesis (e.g. those relating to IRO 5) but functioned as important preparatory steps or additional considerations required for the overall argument construction. For this presentation of what I have termed 'sub-arguments'/'sub-conclusions' here, I will use a structure of gradually increasing relevance and connection with the core arguments listed above, starting with those that provide the basis of the whole philosophical discussion – the issue of the disciplinary **relationship between Theology and Religious Education** and/or **Religious Studies**, more broadly, and the question of adequate **representation of theistic religions in RE**. After that, I will move on to the conclusions drawn from my analysis of **existing theology-centred approaches** with regard to the question of potential (in-)compatibilities with the values of non-confessional, multi-faith RE. The findings of this particular analysis, as we will see, link back to the three principles established above in that they identify **interreligious investigation** as an important focal point for theology-centred RE in non-confessional, multi-faith settings (see principles 1 and 2). This discussion can thus be seen as a preparatory step in the main argument for an interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach to theological content. This will then lead our focus in this summary of conclusions to the most relevant sub-arguments made in the development of this approach:

my RE-specific definitions of theological understanding, religious literacy and the **role of theological understanding in becoming religiously literate** (in relation to theistic religions). The following summary of sub-arguments/sub-conclusions uses exactly this order.

As my discussion revealed, since the phenomenological revolution of the 1970s, the disciplinary **relationship of Theology/Religious Studies** in the context of RE has often been described by researchers in these fields of study as one of little collaboration and interaction. (Various reasons were given in sections 1.2, 4.1.3 and 5.2.1). Evaluating the formation of such attitudes to Theology and RS as regrettable, however, I promoted a reconciliatory view that seeks to engage and combine both disciplines on the basis of shared interests. The practice of interreligious comparison was viewed as a good opportunity for such collaboration. Allowing 'careful' interreligious comparison to take place in the study of religions in schools may serve as a shared interest for interdisciplinary collaboration between the broader Religious-Studies approach of RE and those types of Theology within which interreligious and comparative practices (e.g. in the form of interfaith dialogue and interfaith study) are already flourishing today **(IRO 1)**.

Moreover, for this study, the main justification for promoting an interreligious, theologically orientated focus in RE has been found in the subject's need for **adequate (i.e. God-centred) representations of theistic religions**. Here follows the main argument made in this context: given that belief in God is the defining feature of theistic religions, there is no doubt that studying this aspect in different religious traditions and developing theological understandings in RE – in this case, through a systematic study of key concepts, teachings, beliefs and practices relating to God – plays an important role in becoming religiously literate in relation to these traditions **(Hypothesis 1, IRO 2)**. This focus on the defining feature of theism, especially when viewed through the interpretive lens of transcendence-/God-orientation in people's lives, was also evaluated as a potential path to the self-understanding(s) of theistic religions. Here, the main argument made in support of this theory was: to develop an in-depth understanding of theistic belief, it is important to gain insight into as many different self-understanding(s) of theistic traditions (and branches of them) as possible. These self-understandings are reflected, for example, in the various ways in which their adherents see both God/the divine and their own relationships with God/the divine as lived and experienced in their personal and communal lives. Therefore, an important possibility for securing adequate representation(s) of theistic religions is to focus, specifically, on the question of what it means to have a theistic faith for believers in the divine. Whether or not students develop in-depth understandings of theistic traditions and become religiously literate in relation to them in RE, I also concluded then, ultimately depends (among other things) on the subject's success in offering God-centred representations of these religions.

Another important area of investigation were **existing theology-centred approaches**, proposed for the context of multi-faith RE. Here, the main aim **(IRO 3)** was to analyse the extent to which these methodological approaches can be regarded as appropriate solutions to the compatibility problem that is thought to exist between theology and non-confessional RE so as to be able to work out important criteria which theology-centred RE should fulfil to overcome this problem **(IRO 4, see also principles above)**. Examples considered were: Cooling's (1994b, 2000) concept-cracking strategy; Teece's (2008, 2010c, 2012) soteriological framework for RE; and the narrative approach to theology in RE promoted by Reed and Freathy (Freathy et al., 2014; Reed et al., 2013). However, the study has found that the extent to which these approaches can be said to be adequate responses to the (perceived) compatibility problem is somewhat limited.

- Cooling's concept-cracking approach (as developed in the Stapleford Project) was criticised for being too Christian-centred in its methodological construction (e.g. revelation-centred), despite its self-proclaimed applicability to non-Christian religions, to be viewed as an adequate approach to the non-confessional study of all theistic religions **(IRO 3, IRO 4)**.
- Teece's soteriological framework was found to involve the dangers of essentialism/relativism as it works with a single conception of religion (as vehicles for salvation) and fails to *bracket* ontological questions of the salvific power of religions (which is inappropriate in non-confessional settings) **(IRO 3, IRO 4)**.
- And Narrative Theology (as developed in the Art of Bible Reading Project) was seen as having the potential to be extended to all (theistic) traditions due to its broader theoretical framework. Here, the main criticisms were that it also operates with a single interpretative lens (narrative) and has so far only been used in the context of Christian Bible Study. It therefore lacks detailed theorisation or practical examples of how it could be used in relation to non-Christian religions **(IRO 3, IRO 4)**.

These conclusions established the need for an alternative theologically orientated approach that balances a number of different conceptions of religion/being religious; sees itself as one methodological element in a broader multi-methodological approach, remains procedurally agnostic in its methodological perspective, and also incorporates the interreligious aspect more effectively **(IRO 4)**.

And finally, a number of important sub-arguments/sub-conclusions, directly relevant to the main propositions summarised above, were drawn with regard to the question of the place of theology in non-confessional RE and more specifically, **the role theological understanding plays in becoming religiously literate**. For this, I started with a consideration of the term '**religious understanding**'. To refute the assumption that religious understanding is dependent on religious belief (see discussion of Hirst in section 4.1.1), I drew on Walshe and Teece (2013) who propose a view of religious understanding as a single spectrum of different, but interconnected insider and outsider views which have equal value in RE. However, rejecting part of the argument, I developed this idea further by clarifying that the two types of understanding referred to by them (being religiously conscious as an insider of religion/being conscious of religion, e.g. as an outsider of it) are categorically different things and are, therefore, better interpreted as two spectrums or axes which may intersect at certain points, e.g. when we focus our attention on complex examples such as the ones proposed by Walshe and Teece (see section 4.1.3). Furthermore (influenced by my interpretation of Pett, 2018b), I proposed the argument that religious understanding, in the face of insider/outsider questions, should be viewed as a matter of **complex personal and methodological positionality**. On this basis, it was possible to claim that, even though those who do not have a relationship with the divine may be unable to understand this existential dimension of theistic belief *in the same way* as those who have a theistic faith, this point does not matter in (non-confessional) RE because, *identification* with such a religious perspective is neither the aim nor prerequisite of developing religious understanding. Therefore, it was concluded, just because so called 'outsiders' of a theistic worldview might comprehend the meaning of theistic belief differently from those who believe in the divine – e.g. without basing their understanding on personal experiences of God – this type of comprehension should not be viewed as less deep or valuable **(IRO 2)**.

These philosophical considerations of the meaning of religious understanding led me to consider the current, more education-specific debate about **religious literacy** in the context of RE with a special focus on schools without a religious affiliation. Here, I mainly suggested, in response to what I evaluated as rather vague definitions of religious literacy in current literacy-centred projects and reports (see section 4.2), that the term 'competence' should be used very broadly, in the context of religious literacy, to include not just practical skills, but also the development of a certain *mindset* (e.g. openness to others' perspectives, resistance to prejudice, etc.). The twofold **definition of religious literacy** which I thus developed was:

- Religious literacy involves practical and more abstract types of key competences: *practical skills* include being able to employ religious language in informed, meaningful ways (in particular, respective key concepts, doctrines, but also theories, themes and issues that are central to the study of individual religions or religion as a category of curriculum content); and being able to move, professionally, within the discourse practices of the study of religions (i.e. through practical training in research theories and methods in a range of disciplines including Religious Studies, Theology, Sociology, Philosophy, etc.).
- Moreover, becoming religiously literate involves the development of a certain critical, yet non-(pre-)judgmental mindset towards perspectives other than one's own. This includes the following, slightly more *abstract competences*: knowing the grammar of religion and being able to understand religious language and discourses in the study of religions; developing an awareness of religious conventions, customs and traditions; approaching the study of religions, critically, whilst remaining open to others' perspectives; dealing sensitively with potential areas of conflict and being conscious of religious and cultural stereotyping **(IRO 2)**.

And the most important sub-conclusion made in this context, which ultimately gave rise to the main discussion summarised above, concerned the **relationship of theological understanding and religious literacy**. Here, a major conclusion was that theological literacy/understanding is an important element in, but not the essence of religious literacy (compare principles 2 and 3), and both categories of understanding should be viewed as a matter of degree, attainable through different methods in RE. Students who do not understand theistic religions in a theological way, but have deep knowledge and understanding of them in various other ways (i.e. sociological, historical, psychological, phenomenological, etc.) are religiously literate to a degree, but it is arguable that they would lack important insights central to the self-understanding(s) of theistic traditions **(IRO 2)**. Hence, the need for a theologically orientated approach, specifically designed for the study of all theistic religions in religiously unaffiliated schools (see core arguments, relating to IRO 5, summarised under the bullet point: Main Arguments and Conclusions).

## 8.2 Contributions to Knowledge and Research Limitations

So far in this chapter, I have set out the main arguments and conclusions as well as sub-arguments and sub-conclusions proposed in this research, explaining as well how they answered – both individually and as interconnected parts of the whole argumentation – the five research objectives listed in section 1.6. As a consequence, a number of original contributions to knowledge have been made in the field of the Philosophy of Religious Education, both at the level of theorisation as well as research methodology. Having already described, in some detail, the specific ways in which the present study seeks to contribute to the field of RE in my introduction (see section 1.7), I will limit this final summary of contributions to knowledge to the most significant aspects of this endeavour, concentrating in particular on how these aims were met.

The most obvious ways in which this thesis makes important contributions is that it fills two **gaps in existing research**. The first one concerns a **general philosophical question** regarding disciplinary/methodological approaches to the study of religions in schools. As this study revealed, arguments for the marginalisation of theology in RE have been partially based on the perceived incompatibility of the confessional nature of this discipline (i.e. approaching the study of religions from within a specific faith tradition; requiring or asserting faith; being aimed at spiritual nurture/spiritual development of students, etc.) and the values of non-confessional RE (impartiality vis-à-vis certain ontological questions, tolerance of a plurality of perspectives, etc.) **(IRO 1)**. Chapters 1 and 3 showed, however, that much more research is needed to investigate this philosophical problem more thoroughly. In particular, (it was argued) what has not been sufficiently explored in RE research past and present is whether or not, and if so, on what argumentative grounds, this theory is tenable – by clarifying, for instance, what conditions theological approaches to multi-faith RE would have to meet to be deemed adequate for secular educational settings such as schools without a religious affiliation. By clarifying this issue through the methods of critical analysis of relevant literature and philosophical argumentation, this thesis has thus made an original contribution to knowledge in the field of Religious Education **(IRO 4)**.

The second gap in research concerns the **role of theological understanding in religious literacy**. The contribution made in this context therefore combines the broader philosophical concerns (mentioned in connection with the first gap) with a more education-specific focus on current RE practice. Here, the study explored the fact that there has recently been a shift to literacy-centred RE visible in a number of reports and projects. The most prominent examples considered were *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward – A National Plan for RE* (Commission on Religious Education, 2018); Understanding Christianity; *Improving Religious Literacy* (APPG, 2016); *Living with Difference: Community, Diversity and the Common Good* (Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life, 2015); *RE for REal: The Future of Teaching and Learning about Religion and Belief* (Dinham & Shaw, 2015); and *A New Settlement: Religion & Belief in Schools* (Clarke & Woodhead, 2015). However, as chapters 4 and 5 revealed, what has not been investigated in this context so far is the question to what extent it is necessary to develop understanding(s) of the theological dimension(s) of religions, especially with regard to the aim of becoming religiously literate in relation to theistic religions in RE. In response to this question, this study argued that a potential lack of focus on God (in the context of theistic religions) would lead to an insufficient level of religious literacy in RE. An important conclusion contributed to the current discussion was therefore that furthering theological understanding(s) of theistic religions is an important aspect of becoming religiously literate in and through RE today **(IRO 2)**.

Another way in which this thesis seeks to contribute to the field of RE can be identified in the **nature of the core argument** made in support of my interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach and the methods used in this process. Thus, it is arguable, much originality is visible both in the specific view of theology offered in this thesis (theology defined in terms of its content) and in the complementary interpretive lens of transcendence-/God-centredness developed for the broader hermeneutical framework. Here, one could stress that, despite the fact that my research focuses on key theological concepts/doctrines and seeks to promote a *systematic* study of them in RE, it does not follow any traditional (i.e. *non*-RE-specific) paths to this goal, such as advocating Systematic Theology, for example, of the kind associated with many great Christian theologians of the past like Calvin, Hauerwas, Tillich (in Protestantism) or Küng, Tracy, Barth (in Roman Catholicism). In other words, this thesis promotes a vision of theology which it sees as most suitable for the particular context of non-confessional, multi-faith Religious Education in religiously unaffiliated schools, namely a combined content-focused and life-centred one that puts transcendence-/God-orientation at the heart of the investigation for the purpose of furthering deep learning in RE **(IRO 5)**. This was justified on the grounds of the principles which theology should fulfil to be compatible with the values of non-confessional RE as well as a particular reconciliatory and collaborative view of the relationship between Religious Studies and Theology in the wider academic context **(IRO 1, IRO 4)**. As indicated above, another important contribution is found at the level of **research methodology**. Through what I termed 'semi-autonomous theorising' carried out in a process of 'dialogic philosophical argumentation' (see chapter 2), I provided a unique and highly complex philosophical discussion, consisting of a tight network of interconnected primary arguments/conclusions and sub-arguments/sub-conclusions, underpinned, in turn, by a considerable number of other smaller thought processes and theoretical suggestions, all of which thus established a solid case for a successful revivification of theology in Religious Education.

Yet, the most significant contribution (relating to the contextual considerations outlined above) is perhaps found in the **sector-specific type of theorisation** offered in this research, namely one that takes proper account of a particular non-confessional form of Religious Education, occurring within England and Wales, and the sector with which that form of RE is legally associated – the unaffiliated school. As explained in chapter 1, my theoretical research about the place of theology in Religious Education takes an important position in the wider context of disciplinary research that has rarely been taken before (compare Alberts, 2007, 2010), namely one that pays special attention to the legal parameters governing unaffiliated schools and considers the logical possibilities and limitations set by those parameters with regard to the teaching of RE, and use of theology in particular, in that school sector. Thus, it was argued in section 1.3 that the nature of the Religious Education provided in non-affiliated schools is legislatively different from that of affiliated schools in that it must be in accordance with an Agreed Syllabus document which must itself 'reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain' (see §8(2) and §8(3) of the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA)). Here, special attention was given to the restriction introduced in the (1988 ERA) reformulation of the Cowper-Temple clause which clearly states that only *the study of*, but not the *teaching of* 'religious catechisms or formularies distinctive of any particular denomination' are legally possible in schools without a religious affiliation. With regard to the question of what types of theology might consequently be appropriate for the multi-faith context, I argued that the subject content of RE (Christianity and other major religions), and in particular theological content (of different theistic traditions), cannot be approached from any confessional (i.e. insider's) viewpoint that presupposes faith in God on the part of the students or understands theology as a practice through which insiders of a specific tradition seek understanding of their own faith **(IRO 4)**. However, the most crucial finding made in this literature-review-based research was that relevant debates about the place of theology in RE tend to take insufficient account of the contextual distinctiveness of schools without a religious designation (in terms of what is and is not possible within the present legal framework) which creates an unnecessary impression of general disciplinary incompatibility between theology and non-confessional RE, which could be avoided if theology were viewed and conceptualised in a different (e.g. combined content-based/life-centred) way in this educational context **(IRO 5)**. It was therefore concluded in this thesis that, due to the categorical legal distinctions which exist between the sectors of unaffiliated and affiliated schools, it is necessary to provide what I have termed 'sector-specific theorising' on the place of theology in Religious Education – a project which, so I argued, is particularly crucial to areas of investigation such as the development of students' theological understanding(s) (and theistic religious literacy, more broadly), the relationship of comparative Religious Studies and Comparative Theology in the school context as well as interreligious learning.

In this context, it is also important to repeat the main limitations of this study outlined in chapters 1 and 2. Given the purely theoretical nature of this literature-review-based research, one limitation to emphasise is that the validity of the theories put forward here cannot be tested in practice in the same way as the results of empirical studies would be evaluated. Likewise, it must be conceded that – due to subjective elements in the methods of philosophical analysis and argumentation – some of the findings made in this study are probably not 'reproducible' in the sense that if someone else were to analyse the same topics and issues in the literature of Religious Education, using the same methods, they would also arrive at the same conclusions and/or make the same propositions and recommendations as I have done in this thesis. To measure the quality of my work, it was therefore suggested (in section 1.6) to focus on the following internal and external assessment criteria: important *internal criteria* include linguistic clarity; internal logical coherence of individual arguments as well as their consistency with one another; achievement of overall aims and individual research objectives – whereas *external criteria* are, for example, coherence with and relevance to other discourses (both recent and/or past) in the field of Religious Education and correspondence with practice/policy (e.g. as found in official policy documents, non-statutory guidelines and frameworks, or even as described by other RE researchers). Moreover, the next section (8.3) will also summarise success criteria for a constructive practical application of my interreligious approach in multi-faith RE thus making some more direct links with classroom practice, in addition to the above theoretical contributions.

Another limitation worth repeating here is the fact that my sector-specific argument for an interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach to theology in multi-faith RE in schools without a religious designation is based, primarily, on what appears to be legally possible and impossible in the two sectors of affiliated and unaffiliated schools, thus ignoring to some extent what might actually be happening in practice in these two educational settings, e.g. in terms of the inclusion and/or promotion of God-centred RE in England and Wales – in short: the 'empirical reality' of Religious Education. As explained in section 1.3, this does not mean that this study fails to recognise the complex reality of current RE practice, including theology's complicated state in both school sectors. This complexity is arguably reflected in the fact that, at a practical level, the distinction between 'affiliated' and 'non-affiliated' schools is much more blurred than my sector-specific theories imply, for example because faith groups have statutory rights to determine RE in non-faith schools; because the Religious Education Council of England and Wales has taken responsibility for RE in all schools (whether affiliated or not) and last but not least, because the Commission on Religious Education has recently made worldview-centred recommendations for a new National Entitlement to be introduced in all publicly funded schools (Commission on Religious Education, 2018), which – if implemented in practice – could dissolve the boundaries between the two school sectors further. However, this choice of a narrower contextual focus on the legal framework in which RE in religiously unaffiliated schools operates today was justified on the grounds that the lack of contextual specificity, visible in past and present debates on the place of theology in RE, creates the problem of (perceived) disciplinary irreconcilability identified and explored in this thesis. In order to assess the validity of arguments for a general incompatibility between theology and Religious Education – it was therefore assumed – it is necessary to draw this contextual distinction and to provide an approach to the development of theological understanding(s), designed specifically for non-confessional, multi-faith settings.

And finally, what has also not been possible within the constraints of this study is to develop the hermeneutical aspects of my provisional recommendations for a practical application of my approach (also summarised in the next section) into a proper hermeneutical approach to RE, suitable for the context of the non-affiliated school.

However, as my consideration of the complex relationship between student, teacher and text (object of study) included in section 6.2.4 demonstrated, a possible starting point to develop what I called 'a non-confessional approach to transformative, hermeneutical RE' can be found in Aldridge's recent proposition for a hermeneutics of Religious Education (Aldridge, 2015, 2018). Here, I singled out three aspects of Aldridge's Gadamerian argument that might facilitate such a philosophical endeavour. First, Aldridge sees the subject matter of RE as distinct from the object of study – namely as a shared concern (*die Sache*) that cannot be predicted in advance as it 'emerges' when three hermeneutic relations (teacher-student, teacher-object, student-object) are mutually achieved, thereby converging in the event of learning (Aldridge, 2015, 123). This has the important ontological implication that whenever understanding occurs in all three dialogic situations, teacher, student and text will find themselves in a special relationship of mutual 'belonging' – i.e. in the sense that they all belong to the subject matter in such a moment. The main reason for this is that they are then orientated towards the world in a new and related way (Aldridge, 2015, 125-127). Second, the attainment targets of 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion (or 'interpretation' and 'application' in Gadamer's words) are not separable from one another and should be regarded as one single movement because, from such a philosophical-hermeneutical perspective, coming to know the world also implies an element of self-knowledge (compare Hella & Wright, 2009). For this reason, the moment of mutual understanding can always be seen as 'transformational' in that any new orientation towards a shared concern that emerges in understanding 'constitutes a transformation in the relation to being of the one who understands' (Aldridge, 2018, 248). And third, this particular ontological view of transformation in RE conceptualises truth, in this educational context, not as something 'objective' or 'absolute', but as something that is mainly relational in nature, namely as the 'possibility of disclosure in the dialogic encounter with a particular text or object of study' (Aldridge, 2015, 175). This view of truth and transformation, it was therefore concluded, might provide a solid theoretical basis for possible future developments of the hermeneutical framework for interreligious, transcendence-orientated theology proposed in this study.

## 8.3 Practical Recommendations and Areas for Further Research

This last section of the conclusion consists of three parts: a brief summary of all the practical recommendations made in this thesis; a presentation of success criteria for a potential practical application of my approach, derived from the core arguments listed in section 8.1; and some suggestions for further research into the place of theology in multi-faith RE and the usefulness of my interreligious transcendence-orientated interpretation of theology, in particular.

- **Summary of Main Arguments, Conclusions, Recommendations (Practical Level)**

A major aim of this study was to provide an approach to furthering theological understanding(s) of theistic religions that is both *systematic* and (potentially) *comparative*. These two aspirations have been achieved in the following way: my content-based view of theology (concerned with the study of theological concepts and teachings) was embedded in a broader, believer-/life-centred framework, rooted in the idea of the centrality of transcendence in religious belief. This idea of transcendence-orientation, translated as God-centredness in the context of theistic religions, functioned as an organising principle for the systematic and comparative study of theistic belief(s) across religious boundaries **(IRO 5)**. Specifically, I proposed a multi-strategic approach to the study of theological content, consisting of **three main methodological elements** concerned with 'text' interpretation in the widest sense. These elements, in turn, were viewed as a broader hermeneutical framework, structured around the idea of transcendence-/God-orientation.

The first methodological element was the development of a **general theoretical focus** on theological content. For this, I suggested students would be provided with opportunities to identify and investigate a number of central theological concepts and doctrines found in different theistic traditions. For example, concepts dealing with the nature of God, individual deities or various ideas of ultimate reality (e.g. immanent/transcendent; personal/impersonal; etc.) as well as a set of beliefs, doctrines and principles relating to the divine, as taught by central texts, figures and institutions of the given religions or religious branches. In this context, I also encouraged the use of a wide range of media including text (e.g. sacred scriptures; spiritual literature; academic textbooks; written case studies), audio (e.g. theological discussions, both professional and lay; recorded case studies and interviews with individual believers), video (e.g. documentaries; interviews; lectures; fictional films); objects (visual art and artefacts such as paintings, photography, iconography, devotional items, material markers of identity) and direct contact with representatives of theistic religions and worldviews (e.g. religious leaders; representatives of religious organisations; laypeople) **(IRO 5)**.

Second, I suggested using the following **interpretive framework**, structured around the idea of the centrality of transcendence/God-centredness in theistic belief: the framework consists of four areas of God-centred investigation – again, to be explored either in relation to personal statements and testimonies of what it means to have a theistic faith, or in connection with non-personal hermeneutical 'texts' of the kind defined above, which may then be (re-)interpreted through this interpretive lens. The four research areas were: (i) believers' definitions, conceptions and understandings of the divine – as articulated by adherents of a variety of theistic traditions; (ii) believers' accounts of their personal and communal experiences and understandings of the relationship they have with the divine; (iii) believers' explanations of how they (intend to) lead their individual and communal lives as a result of their orientation towards the divine; and (iv) believers' self-identified reasons and explanations of why they (intend to) lead God-centred lives **(IRO 5)**.

Third, I presented the **example of Scriptural Reasoning** in the context of Christian/Muslim interfaith study as one possible teaching strategy that transfers such a God-centred focus to the classroom. Here, I suggested explorations of sacred texts focusing on key theological concepts relating to the nature of God/Allah, with a particular focus on careful interreligious comparison, carried out in a 'difference-respecting' learning atmosphere. The main purpose of introducing the principles of Scriptural Reasoning was to provide students with the required structures and values to draw links (interpreted, neutrally, to include both identification of similarity and difference), so as to be able to balance questions of universality and particularity, between concepts, teachings and God-centred practices both within and between theistic traditions. This interreligious focus was seen as an important prerequisite for **deep (theology-centred) learning** in RE **(IRO 5)**.

- **Criteria for Success**

Using the core arguments established in this thesis as a theoretical basis, the following propositions for success criteria can be made. If this interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach to theology were applied successfully:

  - Students would develop knowledge and understanding of key concepts and teachings relating to belief in God in several theistic religions including monotheistic and polytheistic ones, thereby becoming religiously literate in relation to theistic religions.

    - Students would become aware of the great complexity and multifaceted nature of theistic religion as well as the internal and external diversity of individual theistic faith traditions, e.g. in terms of their God-centred beliefs and practices.
    - Students would discover the many ways in which theistic beliefs and practices are interrelated, but also disconnected, from one another and, by using the method of 'careful comparison', they learn to recognise, analyse and reflect upon similarities and differences between theistic religions in a way that balances issues of particularity and universality in the study of religions.
    - Students would develop a network of specific interreligious, theological subject knowledge that connects key theological concepts, beliefs and practices both at the level of individual religions (thereby revealing *intra*-connections) as well as between them (revealing *inter*-connections), a process which is defined here as 'deep learning' **(IRO 5)**.

- **Areas for Further Research**

Given the complexity of the philosophical argument presented in this thesis, there are many ways in which this theoretical study could be further developed and/or complemented by additional research in the future. As we have seen in this conclusion, for example, philosophical explorations of a range of secondary topics and issues have been crucial to the development of my core argument for an interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach to theological content, specifically designed for the context of non-confessional RE in religiously unaffiliated schools. If we focus on some of the questions and problems my study raised in these contexts, it is evident that there is room for further research in all these areas. For example, my critical analysis of **existing theology-centred approaches** to RE, carried out in chapter 3, has shown that offering opportunities for interreligious investigation within students' engagement with theological subject matter is an important focal point for the development of any theologically orientated approach aiming to be adequate for multi-faith settings. It would therefore be interesting to see how current pedagogical initiatives such as Understanding Christianity or Narrative Theology could be further developed to use their interreligious potential (more effectively).

Moreover, as chapters 4 and 5 revealed, there is a significant gap in research on the place of theology and theological understanding in non-confessional, multi-faith RE. With regard to influential recent reports such as CoRE (2018), this study argued it is very concerning to see that, in current literacy-centred debates in Religious Education, little to no attention is paid to the **relationship between theological understanding and religious literacy** (e.g. when the latter is viewed as a broader subject aim) and in particular, to the question of the potential role(s) theology might play in helping students become religiously literate (in relation to theistic religions), especially in schools without a religious affiliation. Although the present study sees itself as an important contributor to this research area, much more theoretical and empirical work is needed to explore this topic further and/or approach the issue from various other pedagogical perspectives, in addition to the interreligious, transcendence-orientated one adopted here. One such example could be a comparison of the types of understanding(s) of theistic religions students might gain when using explicitly God-centred methods of exploration (e.g. as suggested in my four areas of God-centred investigation above) versus those types of understanding(s) gained through other, *non*-God-centred, means such as a sociological, historical or phenomenological study of theistic traditions.

This also relates to my discussion of **deep learning in RE** in chapters 5 and 6. Thus, it was argued that interreligious comparison could be an important method to use in the project of furthering deep learning in RE, here: in relation to theistic belief(s) and faith traditions. The main argument made in this context was: interreligious investigation/comparison enables students, among other things, to make logical connections between various aspects of individual theistic traditions; to draw conceptual links between theological content of different theistic religions; and to identify similarities and contrasts in theistic belief and practice between and within individual faith traditions. The conclusion that students' ability to interrelate different aspects of learned information in this way is a crucial contributing factor in in-depth learning in RE was justified on the grounds of recent Cognitive Psychology research on the role of (e.g. propositional) networks in information storing and processes of elaboration in long-term memory formation (see Schunk, 2004). Another great opportunity for further investigations would therefore be to test this theory in practice, e.g. by doing empirical research into the ways in which learners elaborate/memorise information that is deliberately interlinked at a methodological level – as I propose in my examples of teaching strategies for a potential practical application (see chapter 6 and appendix 9.1).

This leads us to the final part of this concluding chapter. Apart from these possibilities for further research in what could be seen as sub-categories of investigation in my overall argument construction, important suggestions can also be made with regard to the actual interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach to theology itself which I developed and promoted in this thesis. Here, the first area of concern is certainly **practical implementation**. As explained in chapter 6, the three practice-related methodological elements proposed in this thesis are merely ideas for a possible practical application and should therefore not be misinterpreted as definite, let alone normative, instructions of how to use my transcendence-orientated approach in the classroom. Whilst one area of further exploration could certainly be using my multi-strategic approach in practice, perhaps with a special focus on the interpretive framework for interreligious, God-centred investigation which I provided in connection with the second methodological element, it could be equally important to explore other ways in which the theoretical suggestions I have made can be put into practice – in relation to different monotheistic and polytheistic religions. Moreover, given that I have stressed, throughout the whole thesis, how essential it is not to promote any methodological lens (including transcendence-/God-orientation) as the only lens to use in multi-faith RE, it would be crucial to see if and how my methodological viewpoints could be integrated in a broader interdisciplinary, multi-methodological approach such as the RE-searchers, for example (Freathy et al., 2015; R. Freathy & G. Freathy, 2013b; see also chapter 3, section 3.5). Furthermore, a second area of possible further research is the **development of resources** for God-centred teaching and learning in RE such as textbooks (designed for use at different Key Stages and ability levels) and other material including mind maps for interreligious comparison of the sort proposed in this thesis (see appendix 9.1). A special concern in this practical endeavour could be to create, for example, teaching strategies and resources which deliberately aim to balance issues of universality and particularity in the study of religions in the way suggested in chapter 7, e.g. by offering students the chance of finding sameness in difference and difference in sameness when comparing the theological content of different theistic religions. And finally, a third focus for further research could be found in the area of **Initial Teacher Training**. A clear field of study to explore in this context are both teachers' and students' conceptions of theology and theistic faith. An empirical project concentrating on teachers' professional learning (e.g. in the form of action research, carried out in school-university partnerships) could, for example, examine questions such as: what conceptions of theology/theism do teachers hold? Can their conceptions be changed? And: if they can/cannot be changed, what effect upon classroom practice does this have in each instance? Etc. In this context, it might be particularly useful to analyse and compare perspectives of teachers from different religious/non-religious backgrounds, including theist, atheist and agnostic ones, and to explore how *their* 'views of the divine' influence the development of students' theological understanding(s) in multi-faith RE.

# 9 Appendices

## 9.1 Supplementary Resources for Interreligious Comparisons of Theological Content: More Ideas for Practical Application

This is a proposition for additional resources for interconnecting/comparing theological content, designed for an investigation of the interrelatedness of concepts and doctrines within and between theistic traditions (compare chapter 6, section 6.2.4 – in particular, the example of Scriptural Reasoning). These resources – which are *mind maps of intra- and interreligious conceptual relations* – are meant to complement the third element (see section 6.2.4: teaching strategy) in my example of a multi-strategic practical application of the interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach to theology promoted in this thesis. They can, however, be used at different stages in the learning process. As with the other practical recommendations made in chapter 6, these resources, too, should mainly be viewed as suggestions as to how the theology-centred approach proposed in this thesis could be used in the classroom, but not as definite instructions or fixed methods of practical application. They have the function of helping students to identify, visualise, and exemplify the links that exist between key concepts, doctrines and practices relating to the divine, both within individual religions and across religious boundaries (that is, internal logical connections of theological content within a belief system versus external conceptual/doctrinal/practical differences and similarities between religions). However, in contrast to the Scriptural Reasoning exercises (see appendix 9.2), for example, these maps should neither be seen as information- nor worksheets. Instead, they constitute imaginary illustrations of the type of mind maps students could create, having studied intra- and interreligious conceptual relations in the ways suggested here. In other words, they are examples of visualisations of the potential links students might draw between a variety of subject content studied in theology-centred RE in relation to different theistic religions.

I will concentrate on three main examples here, all of which can be classified as 'concept maps' (see figures 1 to 3 below[77]). The first two have an identical design and concentrate on theological concepts and doctrines of individual theistic traditions (here: Christianity and Sikhism), providing ways of interrelating these concepts/teachings to one another, internally. The third one differs from those first two maps in that it illustrates how a number of Christian and Muslim views of the divine could be compared to one another, by looking at one doctrinal aspect only, the nature of God/Allah. Possessing the same style and format, the first two maps exemplify how students could explore internal connections of theological aspects of the Christian tradition and the Sikh tradition, respectively. They both consist of a fairly detailed list of key theological content that has been transformed, visually, into small text boxes spread out on a sheet of paper. Visual indicators of potential conceptual interrelations can be found in a number of lines that connect individual text boxes, containing key theological concepts and teachings. (To improve visibility and readability of individual shapes and textual content, these lines have been given different colours. The colours where chosen randomly and do not reflect any meanings.)

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[77] It should be noted that, although the examples produced here are fairly detailed and sophisticated (thus reflecting GCSE or A-Level work, perhaps), all maps can be easily differentiated to match the needs of younger year groups or students who struggle with such tasks for other reasons. This can be done, for instance, by limiting the number of concepts considered on the given map, simplifying the language, and providing more guidance in the process of connecting and comparing theological content (e.g. by giving students, on a different sheet of paper, examples to use for identifying specific links on the mind maps they create).

One way of using these maps in RE classrooms would be to give them to students as pre-designed work sheets or posters. Working independently, in pairs or small groups, students could fill them in, using their own creative associations based on what they have learned about the given traditions (see examples written along the colourful lines in figures 1 and 2). There are several ways to make this possible. First, teachers could select their own collection of concepts and teachings to put into the text boxes, asking students to draw links and write down their associations along connecting lines in the middle of the paper which they would thus identify on their own. In this case, teachers would need to make sure they prepare the mind maps in such a way that pairs of items, allowing for logical connections (such as 'Jesus Christ' and 'Crucifixion' in the case of the Christian faith, and 'Sewa' and 'Gurdwara' in the case of Sikhism), are as much as possible on opposite ends of the paper. Students could then either use the resources, freely, that is identifying their own links (such as 'Jesus is nailed to the cross' in the former and 'Preparing Langar in the Gurdwara' in the latter case) and establishing the links themselves, or they may use maps that already contain lines identified by the teacher (with a few examples, perhaps) to think about ways of describing these indicated connections.

Figure 1: Mind map for identifying internal links between Christian theological concepts/doctrines

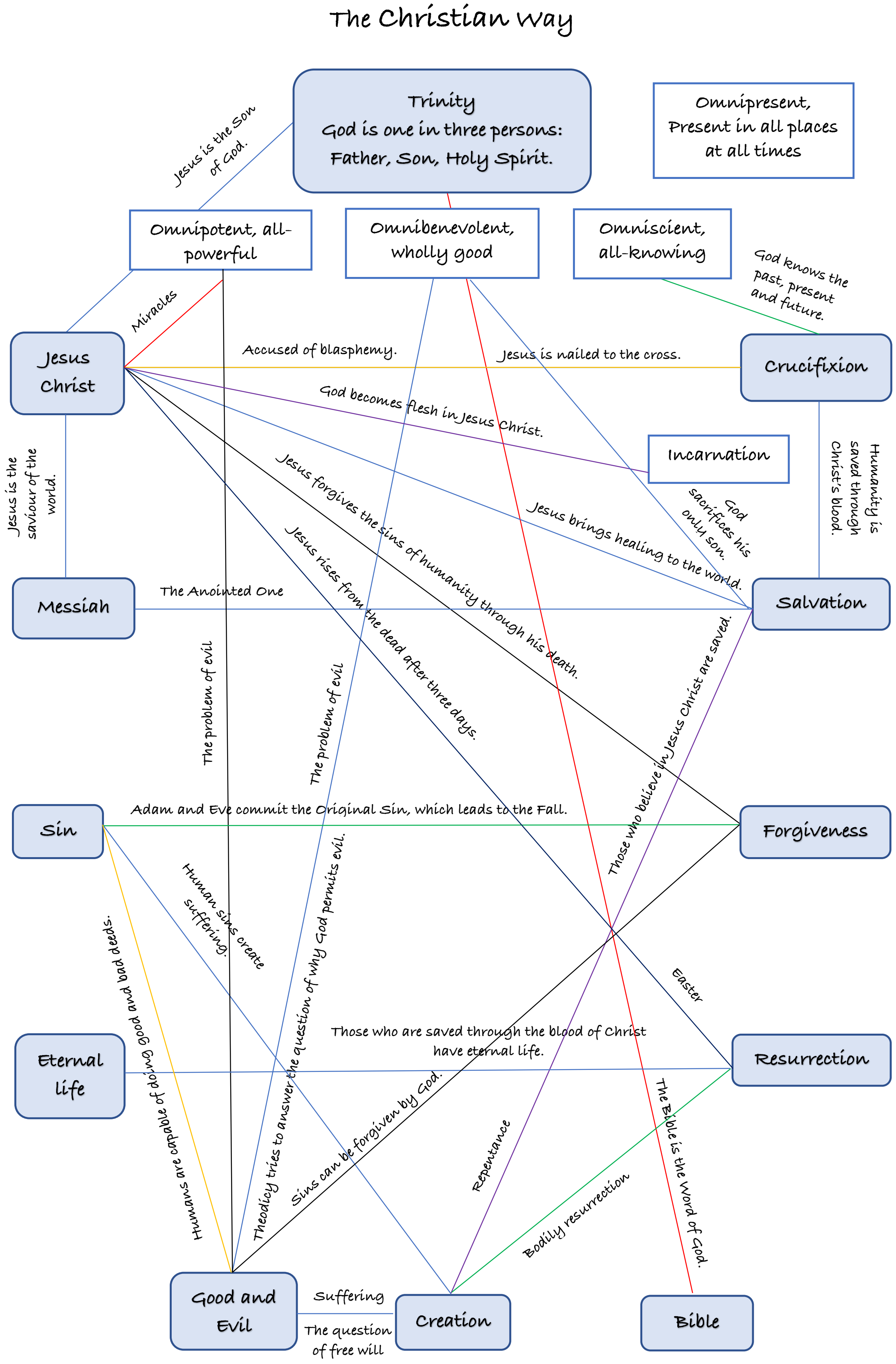
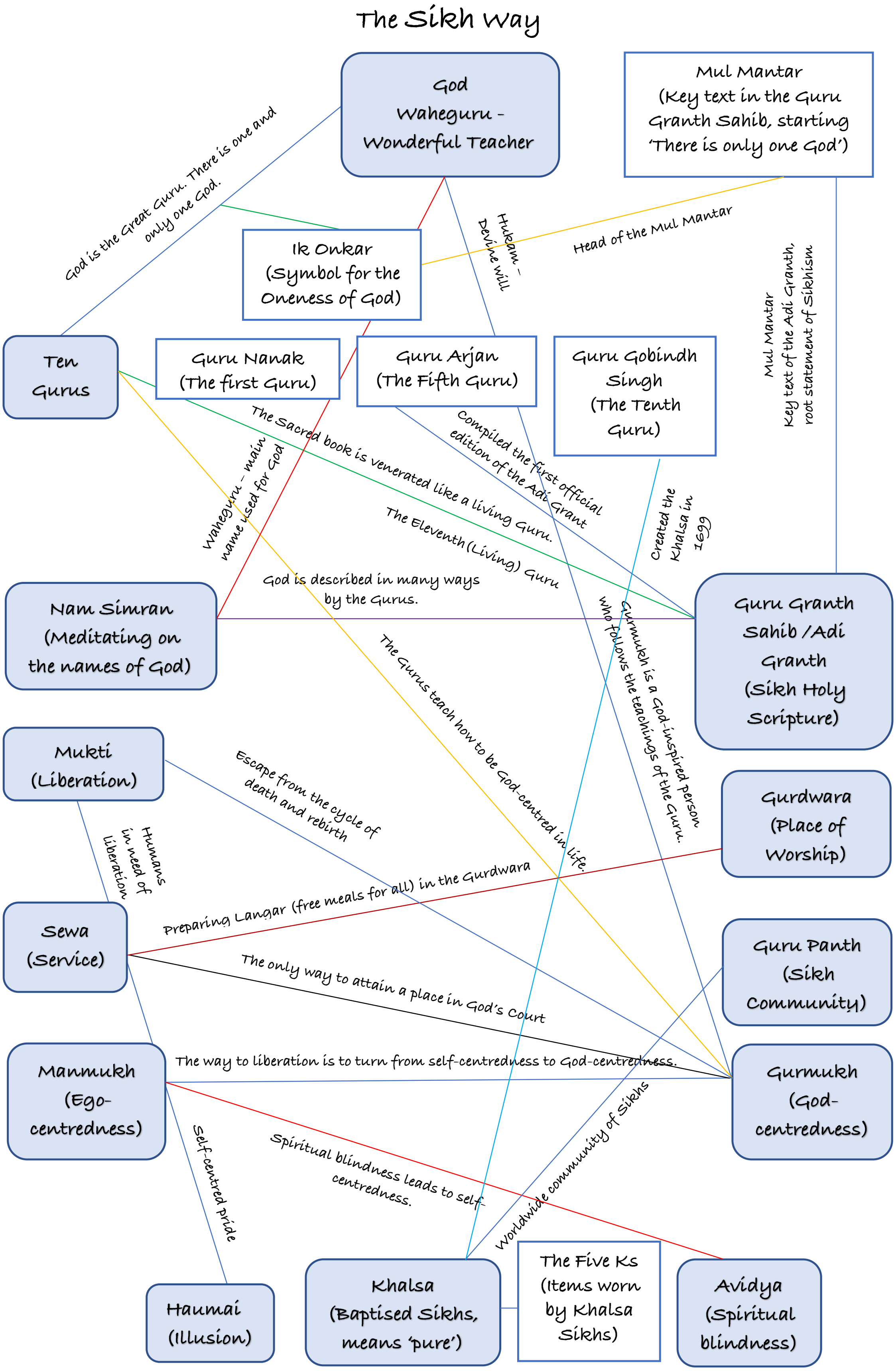

The Christian way
Trinity
God is one in three persons:
Father, Son, Holy Spirit.
Omnipresent,
Present in all places
at all times
Jesus is the Son of God.
Omnipotent, all-powerful
Omnibenevolent, wholly good
Omniscient, all-knowing
God knows the past, present and future.
Miracles
Jesus Christ
Accused of blasphemy.
Jesus is nailed to the cross.
Crucifixion
God becomes flesh in Jesus Christ.
Incarnation
Jesus is the saviour of the world.
Humanity is saved through Christ's blood.
Jesus forgives the sins of humanity through his death.
Jesus brings healing to the world.
God sacrifices his only son.
Jesus rises from the dead after three days.
Messiah
The Anointed One
Salvation
The problem of evil
The problem of evil
Those who believe in Jesus Christ are saved.
Sin
Adam and Eve commit the Original Sin, which leads to the Fall.
Forgiveness
Human sins create suffering.
Theodicy tries to answer the question of why God permits evil.
Humans are capable of doing good and bad deeds.
Easter
Eternal life
Those who are saved through the blood of Christ have eternal life.
Resurrection
Sins can be forgiven by God.
Repentance
Bodily resurrection
The Bible is the Word of God.
Good and Evil
Suffering
The question of free will
Creation
Bible

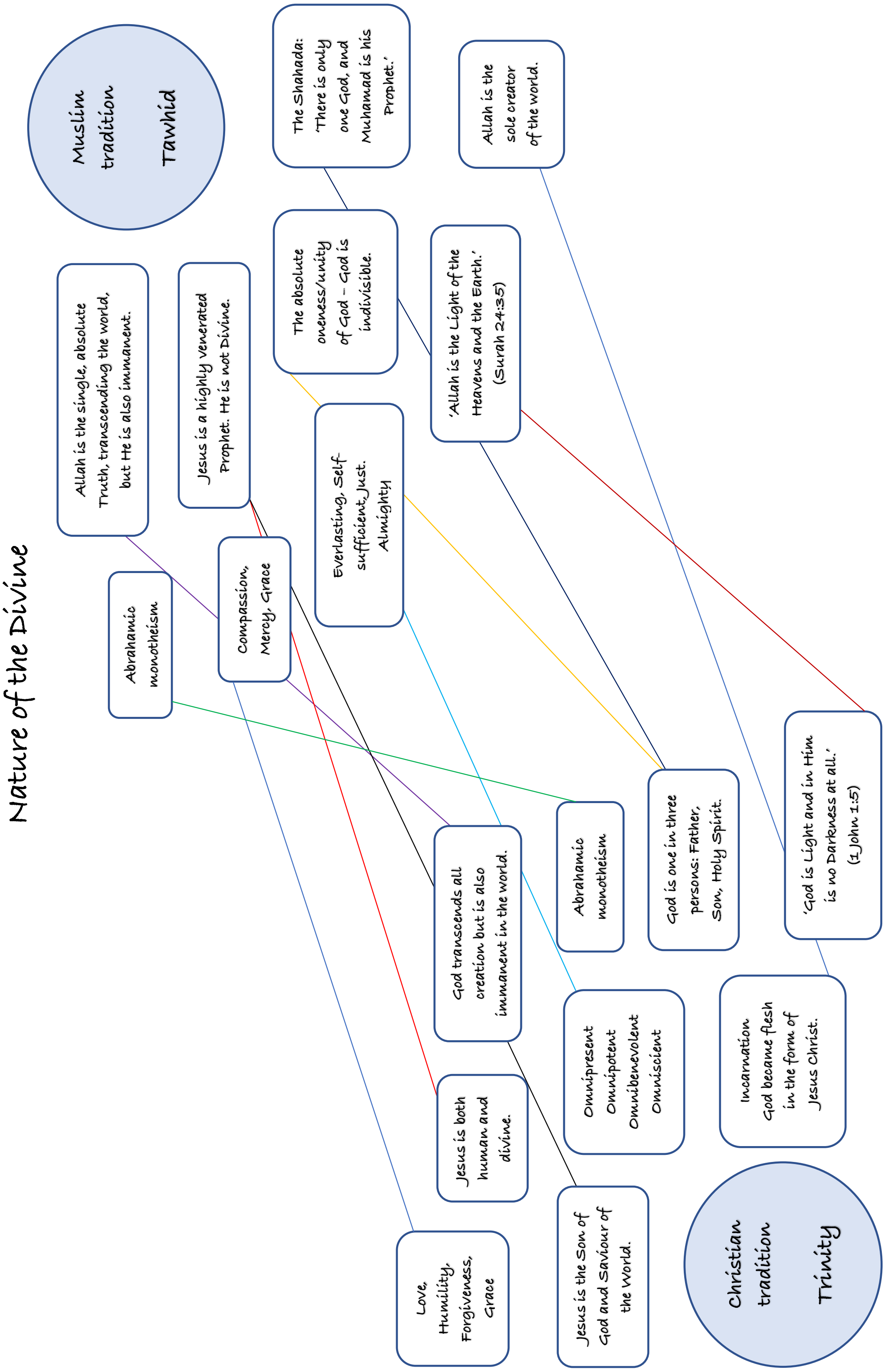
Figure 2: Mind map for identifying internal links between Sikh theological concepts/doctrines


The Sikh Way
God
Waheguru -
Wonderful Teacher
Mul Mantar
(Key text in the Guru Granth Sahib, starting 'There is only one God')
God is the Great Guru. There is one and only one God.
Ik Onkar
(Symbol for the Oneness of God)
Hukam - Devine will
Head of the Mul Mantar
Mul Mantar
Key text of the Adi Granth, root statement of Sikhism
Ten Gurus
Guru Nanak
(The first Guru)
Guru Arjan
(The Fifth Guru)
Guru Gobindh Singh
(The Tenth Guru)
The Sacred book is venerated like a living Guru.
Compiled the first official edition of the Adi Grant
Waheguru – main name used for God
The Eleventh (Living) Guru
Created the Khalsa in 1699
God is described in many ways by the Gurus.
Nam Simran
(Meditating on the names of God)
Guru Granth Sahib / Adi Granth
(Sikh Holy Scripture)
Gurmukh is a God-inspired person who follows the teachings of the Guru.
The Gurus teach how to be God-centred in life.
Mukti
(Liberation)
Escape from the cycle of death and rebirth
Humans in need of liberation
Gurdwara
(Place of Worship)
Preparing Langar (free meals for all) in the Gurdwara
Sewa
(Service)
The only way to attain a place in God's Court
Guru Panth
(Sikh Community)
Manmukh
(Ego-centredness)
The way to liberation is to turn from self-centredness to God-centredness.
Gurmukh
(God-centredness)
Self-centred pride
Spiritual blindness leads to self-centredness.
Worldwide community of Sikhs
Haumai
(Illusion)
Khalsa
(Baptised Sikhs, means 'pure')
The Five Ks
(Items worn by Khalsa Sikhs)
Avidya
(Spiritual blindness)

The third example of a mind map (see figure 3), which has a slightly different visual design, is a tool for interreligious comparison of conceptual/doctrinal theological content – in this case, of two Abrahamic traditions: Christianity and Islam. In contrast to the other maps' broad approach to whole belief systems, I have chosen an example of how this third resource could be used with a very specific focus, namely for the purpose of interrelating and comparing different views of the divine, here: conceptions of the nature of God/Allah. In particular, this resource contains two main concepts, the Trinity and Tawhid, placed on opposite sides of the map (see blue oval shapes). Next to them are white text boxes containing specifications of these particular views of God/Allah as well as additional concepts, ideas, extracts from the respective scriptures, etc. which are all logically related to the two main concepts of the Triune God and the absolute oneness of God. (It is also important to emphasise that the content selection of the given map is simply an example and by no means reflects an exhaustive list of ideas of what the Trinity/Tawhid means for different people in different contexts.)

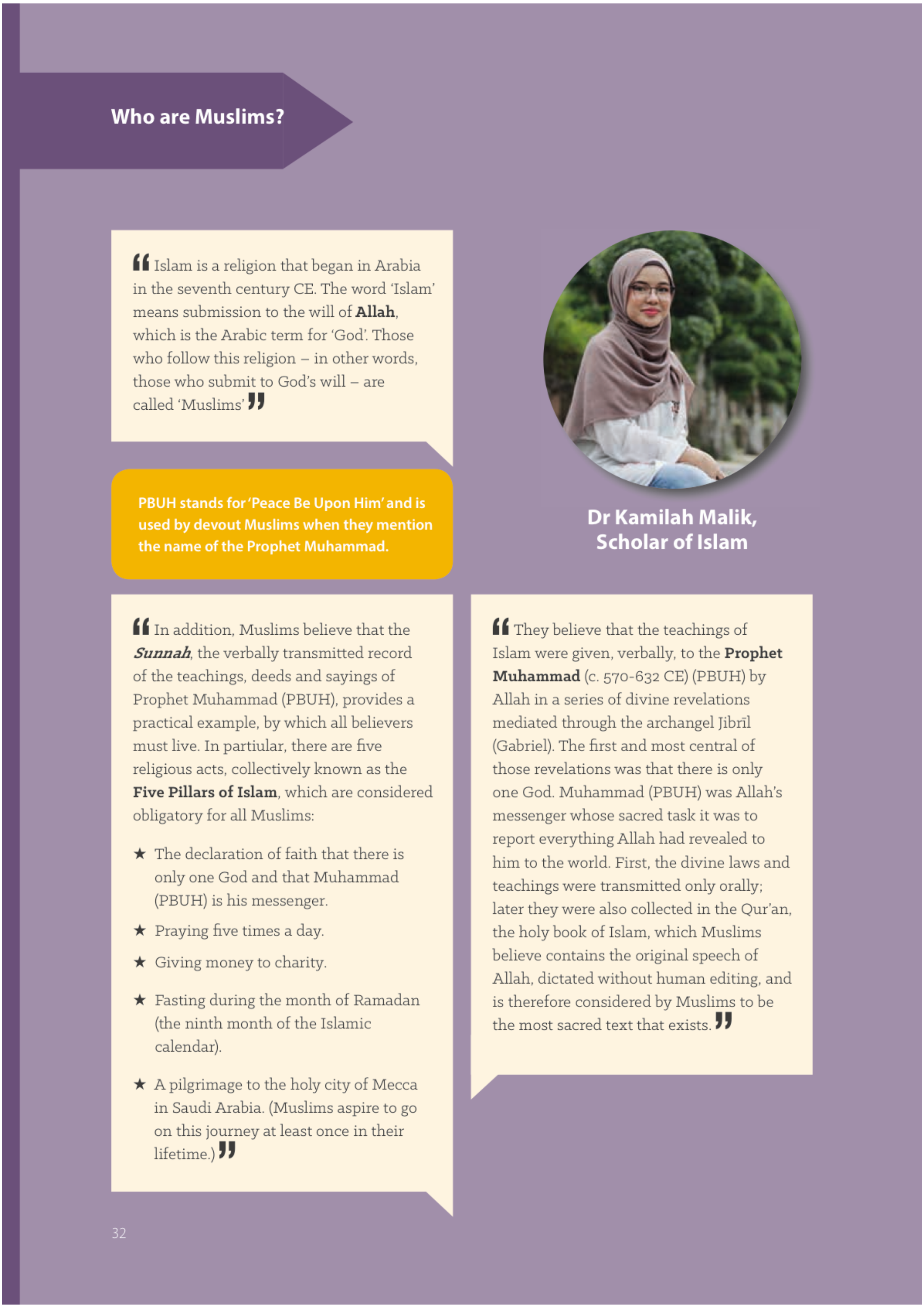
Again, there are many ways in which such a resource could be used in RE teaching, one being that the whole map as pictured in figure 3 could be given or shown to students as a frame of reference and basis for whole-class discussion. Students could then attempt to identify the depicted conceptual/doctrinal interrelations, focusing in particular on commonalities and differences between these individual aspects. Thus, students could realise that both conceptions of the divine are rooted in Abrahamic belief systems and that they both count as monotheisms. Or they might find similarities in how God is referred to as 'Light' in the New Testament (1 John 1:5) whereas Allah is described as 'the Light of the heavens and the earth' (Surah 24:35). On the other hand, some of the connecting lines might indicate differences in belief and practice such as the central Christian belief that God is one in three divine persons and that Jesus is the Son of God versus Muslim conceptions of God as the Sole Creator of the universe who does not have any divine partners and is therefore 'indivisible', etc. (Thus, the findings could also be related back to the Scriptural Reasoning activities presented in section 6.2.4, e.g. by using the mind map for visualisations of the conceptual links discovered in earlier interfaith discussions such as the question of the role and status of Jesus Christ in each tradition.)

Figure 3: Mind map for conceptual comparisons of Christian/Muslim views of the nature of God/Allah


Nature of the Divine
Muslim tradition
Tawhid
Allah is the single, absolute Truth, transcending the world, but He is also immanent.
Abrahamic monotheism
Jesus is a highly venerated Prophet. He is not Divine.
Compassion, Mercy, Grace
The Shahada: 'There is only one God, and Muhamad is his Prophet.'
The absolute oneness/unity of God – God is indivisible.
Everlasting, Self-sufficient, Just. Almighty
Allah is the sole creator of the world.
'Allah is the Light of the Heavens and the Earth.' (Surah 24:35)
Love, Humility, Forgiveness, Grace
Jesus is both human and divine.
God transcends all creation but is also immanent in the world.
Jesus is the Son of God and Saviour of the World.
Omnipresent Omnipotent Omnibenevolent Omniscient
Abrahamic monotheism
God is one in three persons: Father, Son, Holy Spirit.
Incarnation God became flesh in the form of Jesus Christ.
'God is Light and in Him is no Darkness at all.' (1 John 1:5)
Christian tradition
Trinity

Moreover, as with the other resources, this mind map can also serve for more nuanced discussions of the complexity of the notions of similarity and contrast themselves. For example, one could look at an apparent commonality such as the description of God as Light ('and in Him is no Darkness at all', see 1 John 1:5) and Allah as 'the Light of the Heavens and the earths' (Surah 24:35) and encourage students to do some guided research into Christian and Muslim theological understandings of the notion of 'light' in these contexts. This could reveal differences in the apparent similarity of these conceptions of the divine. Here, one could point to the fact that Islamic scholars tend to interpret this verse (Ayat al-Nur) in two main ways, the first one being related to Allah's physical illumination of the heavens and the earth with the sun and moon, which in turn is linked to the concepts of creation and Allah as the all-powerful, sole Creator of the world, and the second one being right guidance, in which case it is the Qur'an that is viewed as the Light of the world (Dodds, 2019, 55-58; Thomas, 2004, 73). In comparison, research into Christian understandings of God as Light might uncover that the term 'light' is linked with life, with God's self-manifestation (in Jesus Christ), with moral guidance, spiritual insight and salvation (Hahn, 1976, 484). This could then lead to explorations of Jesus's self-description as 'the Light of the world' in John 8:12 and possible interpretations of this connection as a sign for the central unity between God (the Father) and Jesus (the Son). And the last clarification worth mentioning here is the possibility of using these resources not only for examinations of major faith traditions – whether to get an overview of theistic belief systems as a whole (maps 1-2) or to consider individual theological aspects of them (map 3), but also as tools that may help students to grasp the complexity of religion(s), thus gaining insight into the great internal diversity found within religious traditions. For this purpose, map 3 could be easily adapted to compare different branches of or theological tendencies within individual religions, ranging from considerations of theological distinctions in Christian denominations (i.e. Catholic/Protestant) to comparisons of Hindu philosophies (i.e. Advaita; Advaita Visista; Dvaita) and their non-dualist and dualist interpretations of ultimate reality. Given the various ways in which these examples of resources and teaching strategies could be utilised, interpreted and adapted in the classroom, I hope it is clear that the interreligious, transcendence-orientated approach I describe in this thesis offers much room for deep (theologically orientated) learning across religious boundaries in multi-faith RE.

## 9.2 RE Textbook *Who is Jesus?* – Extract from Chapter 'Who is Jesus for Muslims?' (Freathy et al., 2018, pp. 32-39)



### Who are Muslims?

> Islam is a religion that began in Arabia in the seventh century CE. The word 'Islam' means submission to the will of **Allah**, which is the Arabic term for 'God'. Those who follow this religion – in other words, those who submit to God's will – are called 'Muslims'

**PBUH stands for 'Peace Be Upon Him' and is used by devout Muslims when they mention the name of the Prophet Muhammad.**

**Dr Kamilah Malik, Scholar of Islam**

> In addition, Muslims believe that the ***Sunnah***, the verbally transmitted record of the teachings, deeds and sayings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), provides a practical example, by which all believers must live. In partiular, there are five religious acts, collectively known as the **Five Pillars of Islam**, which are considered obligatory for all Muslims:
>
> ★ The declaration of faith that there is only one God and that Muhammad (PBUH) is his messenger.
>
> ★ Praying five times a day.
>
> ★ Giving money to charity.
>
> ★ Fasting during the month of Ramadan (the ninth month of the Islamic calendar).
>
> ★ A pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia. (Muslims aspire to go on this journey at least once in their lifetime.)

> They believe that the teachings of Islam were given, verbally, to the **Prophet Muhammad** (c. 570-632 CE) (PBUH) by Allah in a series of divine revelations mediated through the archangel Jibrīl (Gabriel). The first and most central of those revelations was that there is only one God. Muhammad (PBUH) was Allah's messenger whose sacred task it was to report everything Allah had revealed to him to the world. First, the divine laws and teachings were transmitted only orally; later they were also collected in the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, which Muslims believe contains the original speech of Allah, dictated without human editing, and is therefore considered by Muslims to be the most sacred text that exists.

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> “After Muhammad's (PBUH) death in 632 CE, the Islamic empire continued to expand from Arabia in different directions, which started the spread of Islam. By 666 CE, the empire extended from North Africa in the west (present-day Tunisia) to central Asia (Afghanistan) in the east. By 750 CE, the Islamic empire had spread further west, across North Africa, to what are Spain and Portugal today, as well as east to the northern parts of India.”

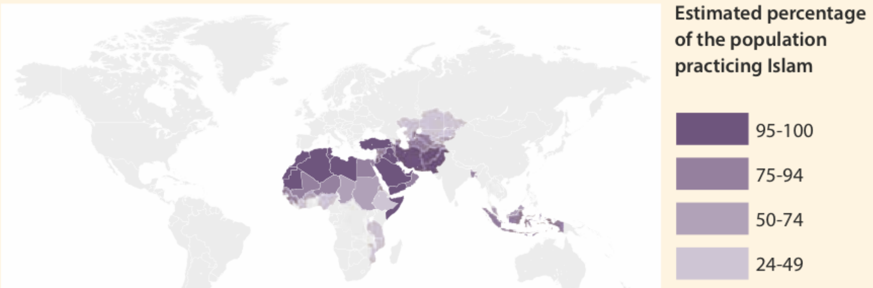
## Sunni and Shi'a Islam

Soon after Muhammad's death, there was a dispute in the community of Muslims in what is today Saudi Arabia about who should be the next religious and political leader (***caliph***). Some of Muhammad's followers wanted the elders of the community to choose a successor. Another group was convinced it should be someone from Muhammad's family, so they favoured his cousin, son-in-law and closest blood relative, Ali.

Muslims who saw themselves as followers of Ali were called ***Shi'a***, which means 'party' of Ali. Those who believed that questions of leadership should be determined by the elite of the community are known as **Sunni** Muslims.

The Sunnis prevailed and chose Abu Bakr, the father of Muhammad's favourite wife, Aisha, as the first *caliph*. Ali did not become a successor until the fourth *caliph* was elected and by that time, violent conflicts had already broken out between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims.

The dispute about spiritual and political leadership was never resolved and to this day, Shi'a Muslims do not accept the first three *caliphs* as rightful successors of Muhammad. Today, Shi'a Muslims are concentrated in Iran as well as in the south of Lebanon and Iraq. In Iraq especially, one can see that the Sunni/Shi'a relationship is a difficult one.



See Pew Research Center:
www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population23

Today, Muslims live all over the world. Nearly two-thirds live in the Asia-Pacific region. More Muslims live in India and Pakistan, for example, than in the entire Middle East-North Africa region. Muslims make up a majority in 49 countries. The highest concentration of Muslims (i.e. as a proportion of each country's population) is found in the Middle East-North Africa region, but Muslims also live as minority groups in other parts of the world including Europe and North America. Islam is the world's second largest religious tradition, with 1.8 billion people following it all over the world. In the UK, between four and five per cent of the population are Muslims.

**Dr Kamilah Malik,**
**Scholar of Islam**

### Prophethood in Islam

"According to Islamic belief, Allah sent many different prophets to humankind over the course of hundreds of years to teach people how to live according to his law. A number of prophets had come before Muhammad (PBUH), including those whose prophecies are recorded in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. These prophets were, amongst others, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus.

Muslims believe that Muhammad (PBUH) was the final prophet to be sent by Allah to guide humanity; for this reason, he is sometimes referred to as 'the **seal** of prophets'. Some Muslims would therefore argue that Islam was not founded in the seventh century, but has always existed and that Muhammad (PBUH), rather than being the founder of an entirely new religion, has perfected the prophecies that went before him. This is why the messages of prophets who had lived earlier than Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), such as Jesus' teachings, are not necessarily viewed as wrong by Muslims, but rather as the specific messages that were right for the people at the given time (e.g. 30 CE in the case of Jesus' prophethood), but needed perfection through Muhammad (PBUH) in the seventh century."

### Jesus as prophet

Christians believe that Jesus was the **Son of God**, which makes him both human and divine (God) at the same time. They also believe he was the long awaited **Messiah** or Anointed One who was sent by God from heaven to earth to save all humans from their sins. When Jesus was alive, the Jewish people around him were eagerly awaiting a specific prophesied figure referred to in the Hebrew Bible as a great king of the lineage of David, chosen by God to restore Israel and rule the world. Those who followed Jesus were convinced that Jesus fulfilled this prophecy – that he was this unique Messiah. In Islam, by contrast, Jesus (called Isa Ibn Maryam – Jesus, son of Mary) has a different status. Although seeing him as a very important and highly respected prophet, Muslims do not believe that Jesus is the Son of God. To say that Jesus is both human and God would contradict the central Muslim belief in the absolute oneness of God (***tawhid***) – the first revelation that Muhammad reported to his followers. How can there be both God and a Son of God at the same time if there is only one God altogether? Since Christians agree with Muslims that there is only one God, they justify their belief in Jesus as the Son of God by arguing that the three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are all united in one Godhead – just as the individual ingredients in a dough make up one cake, for example. This is called the concept of the **Trinity**. Most Muslims, however, do not accept this argument as they still think it contradicts their belief in the absolute oneness of God.

### 'Messiah' in Islam

> "The term 'messiah' also has a different meaning in Islam. Muslims acknowledge that scriptures earlier than the Qur'an, such as the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, frequently refer to messiah figures. They agree that Jesus was such a messiah but they tend to interpret this term as applying to all divinely-guided prophets alike. Even though the Qur'an uses the title 'messiah' only for Prophet Jesus, most Muslims would argue that this simply reflects a historical development. For them, it does not imply that Jesus was in fact the Messiah, understood in the Christian sense as the Son of God and saviour of the world.
>
> Some Muslims also believe in the coming of a ***Mahdi***, which is Arabic for 'messiah'. For Sunni Muslims, this is the prophesied redeemer of Islam who will rule the world for a few years before the Day of Judgement. It is expected that this event will take place at the same time as the predicted return of Jesus at the end of time. In particular, Jesus will help the *Mahdi* in his battle against the Antichrist, the false messiah of which also the New Testament warns (e.g. 1 John 2: 18).
>
> For Shi'a Muslims – specifically the largest branch called Twelver Shi'a Muslims – the *Mahdi* has already been born in the person of Muhammad al-Mahdi, the twelfth Shi'a ***imam*** (spiritual and political leader), who went into hiding after most former *imams* had been murdered. He is known as the Hidden Imam who, one day, will return to become the rightful leader of the whole Muslim community. These two messiah concepts also differ in respect to the nature and importance they ascribe to the *Mahdi*. Sunnis have a more human view of the *Mahdi* and do not expect him to be much more than a rightly guided Muslim of his time. Shi'a Muslims *believe in the spiritual powers of the Mahdi* and see this as one of the foundations of their beliefs."

## OVER TO YOU...

- ★ What are the similarities and differences in Muslim and Christian views about Jesus' nature?
- ★ Why might Christians not be satisfied with the Muslim view of Jesus as prophet?
- ★ Why might Muslims argue against the Christian belief that Jesus is the Son of God and why do they tend to reject the concept of the Trinity.

**Dr Tom Abbott, Theologian**

> “Christians believe that there is one God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is called the doctrine of the **Trinity**. Jesus is the Son of God but his person is not separate from that of God. Father, Son and Holy Spirit together form a perfect union.”

> “Christians believe that Jesus died on the cross but rose from the dead after three days and is now seated to the right hand of the Father in heaven. This is called the ‘resurrection’. They believe that Jesus sacrificed his life so that all who believe in him can be saved from their sins and have eternal life. At the end of time, Jesus will return to the earth to judge the living and the dead.”

> “Christians believe that Jesus was the Son of God and long awaited Messiah sent to the earth by God to save humanity. They believe that he takes away the sins of those who believe in him so that they may have eternal life. He came to the world in human form but he is also God (divine).”

“For Muslims, Jesus was Allah’s beloved messenger and one of the best prophets. According to the Qur’an, he never called himself ‘Son of God’. Jesus performed miracles but these were given to him by Allah and are not a sign of his divine status.”

**Dr Kamilah Malik, Scholar of Islam**

“Belief in the absolute oneness of God is central to Islam. ***Tawhid*** means ‘making one’ and is a very important theological concept. The word itself is not mentioned in the Qur’an but is implicit in the fundamental statement of faith (the first pillar of Islam): ‘there is no God but God’.”

“Most Muslims do not believe in the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus but they agree with Christians that Jesus will return to the earth at the end of time. According to the Qur’an, Jesus did not die but was raised bodily to heaven by Allah. It only looked as if Jesus had died.”

## OVER TO YOU…

- ★ Read the views of Dr Tom Abbot and Dr Kamilah Malik (on pages 36-37) and compare them with the Qur’anic sources on the next two pages (38-39).
- ★ Which Qur’anic source reflects which Muslim belief about Jesus?
- ★ Do any of the sources contradict one or more Christian beliefs about Jesus? If so, explain how.

### Scriptural Reasoning

Religious believers who are interested in inter-faith dialogue (engaging in constructive, fruitful discussion about faith matters with people from other religious traditions) sometimes participate in so called **Scriptural Reasoning** practices. This means that people from different faiths (here: mainly Jews, Christians and Muslims) come together to read and discuss passages from their sacred texts. Thus, they explore the ways in which textual study can help them understand their own faith tradition, learn from other religions, and respond to pressing political, social, economic and environmental issues to do with modern life. The aim is to share and discuss spiritual insights in an atmosphere of hospitality, mutual trust, respect and potential friendship.

SOURCE A

O People of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion nor utter anything concerning Allah except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and his word which He conveyed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him. So – believe in Allah and His messengers, and say not "Three" – Cease! (It is) better for you! Allah is only One God. Far is it removed from His Transcendent Majesty that he should have a son. His is all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. And Allah is sufficient as Defender.

Qur'an, Surah 4: 171 (Pickthall Translation)

SOURCE B

And because of their saying: We killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, Allah's messenger – they killed him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so to them; and those who disagree concerning it are in doubt of it; they have no knowledge of it except pursuit of a conjecture, they killed him not for certain.

But Allah took him up to Himself. Allah was ever Mighty. Wise.

Qur'an, Surah 4: 157-158 (Pickthall Translation)

Part Four • **Who is Jesus for Muslims?**

SOURCE C

And we caused Jesus, son of Mary, to follow in their footsteps, confirming that which was (revealed) before him in the Torah [Hebrew Bible], and We bestowed on him the Gospel in which is guidance and a light, confirming that which was (revealed) before it in the Torah – a guidance and an admonition to those who ward off evil.

Qur'an, Surah 5: 46 (Pickthall Translation)

SOURCE D

And when Allah says: O Jesus, son of Mary! Did you say to mankind: Take me and my mother for two gods beside Allah? he says: Be glorified! It was not mine to utter that to which I had no right. If I used to say it, then You knew it. You know what is in my mind, and I know not what is in Your Mind. You, only You, are the Knower of Things Hidden.

I spoke to them only that which You commanded me (saying:) Worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord. I was a witness of them while I dwelt among them, and when You took me, You were the Watcher over them. You are witness over all things.

Qur'an, Surah 5: 116-117 (Pickthall Translation)

**OVER TO YOU…**

- ★ **Write a dialogue between a Muslim and a Christian who engage in Scriptural Reasoning about the question: Who is Jesus? Use one of the Qur'anic sources from pages 38-39 as a basis for the discussion.**

***(Remember that the aim of Scriptural Reasoning is not to convince others of your opinion but to offer room for the exchange of insights shared in an atmosphere of mutual respect.)***

39

Source: Freathy, R., Reed, E., Davis, A., John, H. & Schmidt, A. (2018). *Who is Jesus? Supplementary Materials for Religious Education in the Upper Secondary School.* University of Exeter Design Studio.

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