

## REVIEW ESSAY

**On Holy Ground: The Theory and Practice of Religious Education, by Liam Gearon, Abingdon, Routledge, 2014, 216 pp., £85.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-415-51710-2**

In *On Holy Ground*, Liam Gearon argues that '[t]he problem of modern religious education [is] how to ground the subject when it is no longer grounded in the religious life, in the *life of the holy*' (p. 8). In the first chapter, on describing 'the holy', Gearon turns to Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige* [The Holy] (1917), which was ironically translated - bearing in mind its opposition to over-rationalization - as *The Idea of the Holy* (1950). Otto sought to balance the rational and non-rational aspects of religion, noting feelings and emotions, but also admitting the possibility of knowledge of the transcendent, in conceptual or rational terms, coming by faith. For Otto, 'holiness', or 'the holy', is a distinctive interpretative category, peculiar to the sphere of religion, set apart from the rational due to its irreducibility and ineffability, and thus capable of being discussed, but not strictly defined (pp. 6-7). Gearon explains:

'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...' (p. 7).

By contrast, according to Gearon, Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment forms of knowledge – which reject 'revelation as a source of knowledge', remove 'sacred-profane, holy-unholy distinctions', and separate 'the holy from the idea of the holy, the idea of the holy and the holy life' (pp. 3 and 14) - 'have their origins in the critique of religion' (p. 8) and seek 'alternative grounds [for] knowing and being in the world', emphasising reason, autonomy, individual choice and freedom of thought (p. 4). By being grounded in such traditions - partly in response to the religious/philosophical pluralisation of societies and the international legal principle of non-discrimination on religious/philosophical grounds (p. 125) - modern religious education has increasingly understood 'the holy' through a 'multitude of rationalizations' and the appropriation of disciplinary frameworks which 'emerged in relation to, often a reaction against, those forms of knowledge held to be sacred, revealed truth' (p. 9).

In this self-confessedly ambitious book, Gearon attempts to trace the epistemological grounds of modern religious education by examining the relationship, since the Enlightenment, between religion and each of the following disciplines (one per chapter): philosophy, the natural sciences, the social sciences, psychology, phenomenology, politics and aesthetics. In each case, he identifies adversaries, who sought to remove religion, and advocates, who sought to better understand it (albeit only 'insofar as religion mirrors their interpretation') (p. 9). He then outlines the various appropriations of these disciplines within 'non-confessional religious education' and 'non-denominational teaching about religions' (pp. 8-9). In doing so, he distinguishes between disciplinary 'themes' and 'methods' (i.e. curriculum content and pedagogical approaches) (p. 10). Thereby, he seeks to demonstrate that the search for alternative epistemological grounds for religious education – 'the epistemological filters through which religion is conceived and the subject justified' - has been undertaken 'within intellectual traditions which rejected the holy, not only as a form of knowledge but as an orientation in life' (p. 149).

Gearon argues, for example, that social scientific appropriations in religious education have led to reductionism and functionalism, not least the propensity to present religion as a means of attaining social and community cohesion by highlighting those aspects of religion which are compatible with such social goals and excluding those which are not (p. 60):

'If religion is seen as (simply) an instrument of social progress or academic knowledge social scientific appropriations can be seen as entirely satisfactory, serving pedagogical as well as socio-political needs.'

Nevertheless, the answer will be very different if one holds that the core ends and purposes of religion are at root, in essence, of deeper (existential, salvific) significance than the (merely) social or political. A religious education in this latter, deeper sense would regard religion in education that acts (merely) as a servant of the social and the political as a limited and limiting educational goal, however profoundly insightful the social scientific theory and method underpinning pedagogical practice.' (p. 75)

Most significantly, Gearon demonstrates how the discourse of religious education today is permeated by theories about the relationship between religion and politics. In the interests of promoting tolerance and respect, religious education is increasingly required – not least by European political institutions - to comply with universal standards of democratic citizenship and human rights, such as freedom of religion and belief (pp. 122, 125 and 127). Yet, for Gearon, justifications for religious education related to socio-political ends create a twofold problem:

‘one, the confinement of religious education to limited (liberal democratic) political and pedagogical goals (pedagogy serving political purpose) risks limiting religion as much as religious education to the political and public profile and purposes of both; two, even if it could be shown to be political useful [sic], is political justification sufficient as epistemological ground for religious education?’ (p. 130)

In the final chapter, Gearon concludes that modern religious education has guarded ‘that epistemological border between the holy and idea of the holy’ and become ‘critically distanced from the object of its study’ (p. 151). Thereby, it has foreclosed ‘*lived* engagement [with] lives sanctified by an orientation to the holy’ (p. 152). The holy is now ‘an idea to be dissected, not a path to be lived’ (p. 164). In response, he contrasts three ‘enlightened’ epistemological parameters with ‘antinomies’ drawn from a re-examination of three religious lives: (i) *rationality* is contrasted with *faith* in the context of the life of St. Bernard of Clairvaux; (ii) *secularity* is contrasted with *sanctification* in the context of the life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux; and (iii) *temporality* is contrasted with the *eternal* in the context of the life of St. Alphonsus Ligouri (pp. 150 and 152). Thereby, Gearon also highlights the moral implications of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment frames of reference, particularly in terms of ‘the limitedness of learning in comparison to the holy life, personal sanctification and salvation’ (p. 156). To illustrate this, he turns to St Augustine’s *Confessions* which represents ‘a Christian apologetic ... expressed in personal terms, a story of a life addressed to the Creator of his life, a narrative addressed to God, the author addressing the Great Author’; ‘[a] salutary synthesis not of theological abstraction but of deep conviction of the urgency of response to the saving grace of God’; and ‘a spiritual roadmap for lost souls’ (p. 161). For Augustine, ‘reason is a means of understanding faith – faith seeking understanding’ (p. 161) and the salvific purpose of education relates not to ‘this world but the world to come’ (p. 162). Similarly, through a discussion of the life of Thomas à Kempis, Gearon warns of the limitations of scholarship as a means of attaining sanctity, and highlights the difference between having knowledge and experiencing its truth (p. 163). Thus, ‘[t]he 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’ (p. 164). Formal learning is a gift, but it ‘is not in the holy life seen as the highest of gifts’ (p. 164). Accordingly, citing John Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding*, Gearon associates pride, vanity and self-conceit with Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment attitudes towards learning, which furthermore run the risk of ignoring that which is ‘pressingly existential’ and ‘a matter of graver urgency’ (p. 168).

*On Holy Ground* is stimulating, thought-provoking and raises profound questions concerning the ontological and epistemological foundations of religious education. In his effort ‘to trace the epistemological roots of modern, non-denominational religious education’ and the ways the subject has attempted ‘to re-ground itself using a range of academic disciplines and epistemological traditions’, Gearon has surveyed much of Western intellectual history over the last three centuries (p. 14). However, on occasions, this breadth of coverage prohibits him from developing his arguments sufficiently, or from providing clear and coherent explications of some key theoretical and conceptual frames of reference, for example, the conceptual, temporal and spatial parameters of ‘modern religious education’, or the criteria by which academic disciplines/forms of knowledge were selected for attention and omission. In the latter regard, the treatment of the relationships between academic theology and religious education, and between theology and

epistemological grounds other than the 'philosophical', is insufficient (pp. 35-37). Furthermore, the polarisation of 'adversaries' and 'advocates' of religion is not always capable of capturing the complexity of the discourses to which they pertain, and the binary division between disciplinary 'themes' (curriculum content) and 'methods' (pedagogical approaches) does not always clarify processes of appropriation. For example, it is not clear how the adoption of curriculum content derived from particular disciplines relate to the epistemological and methodological lenses through which it is studied (e.g. the natural sciences, pp. 53-57), or whether the relationship is necessary or contingent between discipline-specific justifications for religious education and the subject's 'themes' and/or 'methods' (e.g. politics, pp. 123-131). By narrowing his scope, Gearon may have been able to pay more attention to expounding the relationship he envisages between religious education grounded in the religious life and the life of the holy, on the one hand, and existing models of (non-)confessional and (non-)denominational religious education, on the other. On the basis of the arguments and evidence presented here, confessional religious education (declaring and seeking to foster particular beliefs) in the context of faith schools might be deemed the only legitimate way forward.

However, there might be reasons to question Gearon's analysis, not least the absence of a discussion of counter-arguments and counter-evidence. There are many who would: (i) refute the ontological assumptions which lead him to criticise modern religious education for being limited, limiting and reductionist, and upon which he grounds his re-conceptualisation of the subject; (ii) reject his particular accounts of the holy, the holy life or the religious life, for example, by recognising heterogeneity, heterodoxy and heresy; and (iii) rebut his claim that philosophy, the natural sciences, the social sciences, psychology, phenomenology, politics and aesthetics have all rejected the holy as a form of knowledge and an orientation in life, for example, by arguing for a distinction between non-religious and anti-religious epistemological grounds, and for a multitude of complex connections that go beyond simple 'for/against' responses. In this regard, elsewhere in the present volume of *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, and in relation to another of Gearon's works, Robert Jackson highlights his failure to distinguish between the supposedly secularist *origins* of disciplines/forms of knowledge and the *subsequent* diversity and developments within them.

It could be argued, furthermore, that Gearon's methodology does not enable him to show with utmost rigour how his selection of 'key classic texts within a range of disciplines [have] historically informed and epistemologically formed the identity of religious education as a subject' (p.12). A meticulous, detailed and comprehensive documentary analysis is required to produce a genealogy of ideas and an understanding of their diffusion. Yet, in terms of identifying patterns of appropriation, his approach was to undertake 'keyword searches ... in subject specific and generic education journals, where the respective disciplines ... interface religious education', with particular attention being paid to *Religious Education* (1903 onwards) and *Religion in Education* (1934 onwards) (p. 10). Therefore, leaving aside the question of how he determined which articles are representative of the non-confessional and non-denominational religious education with which he claims to be concerned (p. 8), it can be argued that his generalisations about the epistemological grounds of modern religious education are based upon evidence that constitutes a potentially unrepresentative purposive sample. So in seeking to provide 'a more general history of *ideas*', Gearon may have sacrificed the methodological rigour which characterises some of the historical inquiries he criticises for being narrow, limited and insular (pp. 10 and 12). The same lack of precision is also sometimes evident in the presentation of the text which contains many grammatical and typographical errors.

Overall, notwithstanding the limitations above, *On Holy Ground* makes a significant contribution to religious education theory and should be read widely within the field, particularly by researchers. There is much here to enrich, enlighten and enliven contemporary academic debates about religious education, and anyone contributing to those would benefit from reading this book. Despite the suggestion in the book's subtitle, there is insufficient material here about 'practice' to warrant recommending the book to those teachers and teacher trainees primarily concerned with pedagogical principles and procedures. Nevertheless, in this regard, my personal responses, which are almost certainly not those that Gearon intended to provoke, are as follows. First, the argument and evidence are insufficient to warrant giving up the quest for the (un-)Holy Grail of 'non-confessional' religious education in schools without a religious affiliation, but they help to demonstrate the unattainability of religious education that is, in absolute terms, objective, neutral and value-free. Second, if the ontological and epistemological grounds of religious education matter as much as

Gearon suggests, then teachers and pupils need to be initiated into methodological and hermeneutical dialogues about such issues. In ‘non-confessional’ religious education, teachers and pupils need to be able to demonstrate at times a critical distance, not only from the objects of its study, but also from the methods of study. Third, if deemed successful, Gearon’s methods of describing and explicating disciplines/forms of knowledge, as well as their impact upon methodologies and pedagogies of researching and teaching religion(s), might be paradigmatic for other approaches to initiating teachers and pupils into such discourses, albeit at appropriate conceptual levels. Thereby, they too, can be taught to look both *through* and *at* the epistemological filters through which religions are studied. Fourth, following on from Gearon’s utilisation of ‘religious lives’ to illustrate epistemological points, narrative theory/theology might have a particular role to play in removing some of the critical distance between pupils and the object of study (when necessary), and conveying to them the interconnections in ‘religious lives’ between beliefs, identities, texts, contexts, traditions and ethical actions. Lastly, if one accepts that ‘non-confessional’ religious education cannot be predicated upon distinctively ‘religious’ ontological assumptions and should be an epistemologically heterogeneous and multi-disciplinary field of study, then maybe the search for a single ‘ground’ is misguided and there is a need for a new metaphor.

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