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Religious Literacy as Religion Literacy: A Response from the UK

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Abstract

This response builds on Wolfart’s observations on the theological underpinnings of the “religious literacy” paradigm in a North American context by reflecting on the situation in the United Kingdom. Here, it is even more apparent that institutional factors are a bigger driver than methodological factors, driven by the neo-liberalisation of the universities and the entrenched institutional dominance of confessional approaches to the study of religion. Yet it also provides a way for social-scientific scholars of religion to explain the instrumental value of the subject to policymakers and funding bodies. I conclude by sketching an approach to religious literacy more in keeping with post-phenomenological Religious Studies.

Keywords

religious literacy – interfaith – United Kingdom – TRS – religious education

1 Religious Literacy in the UK Context

Rather than begin by defining religious literacy – I’m sure that you have read a few of these in this issue already – I’ll instead quote Stephen Parker: religious literacy is “a flexible term, the substance of which is contingent upon circumstance and setting” (2020: 129). While Wolfart’s paper focuses explicitly on the promotion of religious literacy in Religious Studies departments, predominantly (though not exclusively) in North America, the specific circumstance
and setting I am most familiar with is the UK in the 21st century, so that's what I will focus on in this short response. Yet even in that specific context there are different factors at play, multiple circumstances and settings, which I will try to untangle. Like so many of the concepts and paradigms we work with, religious literacy is not solely owned or controlled by academics. Lawmakers, the media, and schools all contribute significantly, perhaps even driving the conversation in some contexts, and the level of influence of these different stakeholders will not necessarily be consistent or uniform. Moreover, economic and institutional concerns may have as great an influence on the adoption of religious literacy as an educational aim, as I aim to show. I'll conclude by suggesting an approach to religious literacy that could work better for all the invested parties.

In the UK, the use of religious literacy in schools is relatively recent, beginning only with Andrew Wright’s “Religious Education in the Secondary School: Prospects for Religious Literacy” (1993). Wright defined RL as “the ability ... to reflect, communicate and act in an informed, intelligent, and sensitive manner towards the phenomenon of religion” (1993: 47). This is not to be understood phenomenologically, however, which Wright specifically states; rather, he is advocating for a focus on truth claims a la theological philosophy of religion (see Hannam, et al., 2020: 218). Secondary Religious Education has traditionally tended to draw more upon Philosophy of Religion than tertiary Religious Studies does, but even so, Wright’s proposals were not widely adopted. The Commission on Religious Education’s 2018 report, “Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward, a National Plan for RE”, which has set the agenda for Religious Education in the UK for at least the next decade, does not use the term “Religious Literacy” at all, instead opting for an approach based on regarding religions as a variety of the broader category of “worldviews” (Religious Education Council 2018).

Turning to the universities, the “2022 Subject Benchmark Statement for Theology and Religious Studies”, published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA 2022), an independent charity ensuring quality across the sector, uses “religious literacy” only twice. It is perhaps revealing that both mentions are in the section “Purposes of a Theology and Religious Studies Degree”, in the subsection labelled “Broader Social Purpose”:

1.13 The study of TRS [Theology and Religious Studies] contributes to community understanding and development, and the avoidance or

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1 I am not suggesting that this is what Wolfart is arguing, to be clear.
challenging of prejudices arising from misinformation or misunderstanding. It can ensure that debates in the UK and beyond about matters of religion are well informed and of high quality, and based on competent religious literacy.

QAA 2022: 4

The second mention, two paragraphs later, notes a need for courses in “cultural diplomacy and religious literacy or sensitivity” for public organisations including the Foreign Office, the Police and various NGOs (2022: 5). So, it is worth noting that here, while religious literacy might be an outcome of a particular application of the study of religion – specifically, in the public sphere and governance broadly construed – it is not presented as primary or central to the study of religion in general. Notably, in both the QAA Subject Benchmarking report and the RE Commission’s “Religion and Worldviews” report, religious stakeholders are also involved, so these are not entirely secular or academic claims.

What we see then is that in the UK context, religious literacy seems to be an idea with more currency in public policy than in education. Moreover, if we look more closely, we find a consistent pattern of connecting religious literacy to interfaith dialogue, or “cultural diplomacy” (QAA 2022: 5). This is clear in the stated mission of the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life (CORAB), chaired by Baroness Butler-Sloss, which convened in 2015 “to consider the place and role of religion and belief in contemporary Britain, to consider the significance of emerging trends and identities, and to make recommendations for public life and policy”. The Commission, which is ongoing, published a report in 2015 entitled “Living with Difference: Community, Diversity and the Common Good” which was debated in the House of Lords. It will be clear from the title, and the involvement of religious leaders including the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, that the Commission has a clear focus on interfaith dialogue, and indeed “religious literacy” appears throughout the report in this respect. The second of their recommendations reads:

Much greater religion and belief literacy is needed in every section of society, and at all levels. The potential for misunderstanding, stereotyping and oversimplification based on ignorance is huge. The commission therefore calls on educational and professional bodies to draw up religion and belief literacy programmes and projects, including an annual awards scheme to recognise and celebrate best practice in the media.

CORAB 2015: 8
The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, founded by the former Labour Prime Minister, also repeats this connection between religious literacy and interfaith dialogue, though with a more explicit concern with “Islamic Extremism”. Their resource for teachers, “Essentials of Dialogue” describes religious literacy as

Aware[ness] of the significance of religious belief, faith and traditions as a force in contemporary global society [...] an understanding of diversity within traditions as well as [...] a spectrum of perspectives – including both those of a range of religious believers and those with secular worldviews.

Tony Blair Institute for Global Change 2017: 25

Yet clauses like the above (“religious believers and those with secular worldviews”) or the ever-popular “all faiths and none” can usually be entirely removed from a sentence without changing its meaning – though not perhaps its purpose, which I suggest is to imply the ongoing importance of religion. Similarly, I have been told by more than one person involved in the creation of the RE Council’s “Religion and Worldviews” plan that the formulation “religion and worldviews” was a compromise with the stakeholders representing religious institutions, allowing for religion to be a kind of worldview, albeit not merely a worldview like others, but a special one. Such analyses present religion as not only a feature of contemporary life, but a fundamental, even essential, one. Hannam, et al., “Religious literacy: A way forward for religious education?” states that “Religion, belief and faith are integral features of human life and culture and the way we engage with others, particularly in the public sphere, ought to be aware and respectful of this” (2020: 219, emphasis added). Religious literacy then can function as a surrogate for interfaith, in its promotion of the positive value of religion for societies. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that the UK, unlike the US, is a state which, despite rapid secularisation, still has a national church with representatives in the upper house of government and of which the monarch is head, and as Liam Sutherland has argued, the interfaith movement is in essence a Christian ecumenical project (2018).

2 Religious Literacy and the Instrumental Value of RS

To be clear, I am not arguing that when universities have adopted the religious literacy paradigm that they are deliberately taking part in an ecumenical project. Rather, they are obliged to take part in a discourse set by institutions, policymakers and funders who are. An undercurrent in Wolfart’s article is
The appeal of religious literacy for Religious Studies academics is not so much a theoretical matter, but rather a practical one. Specifically, it allows us to express the instrumental value of Religious Studies in a way that university administration and funding bodies can understand.

Religious Studies has been particularly unsuccessful in communicating what it does outside our own small field. To some degree, this is because the discourse on religion is dominated by normative and insider voices who are invested in constructing religion as a universal and transcendent phenomenon, and who have the ear of media and policy makers. Yet it is in part also a disciplinary issue. We agree that post-phenomenological Religious Studies is not concerned with personal transcendence, spiritual meaning, or moral teachings, but we are less clear on what makes it not simply a sub-category of history, sociology, or anthropology. Religious Studies has struggled to define itself in positive terms, rather than what it is not.

The period when Prothero (2007) and Moore (2007) were presenting their religious literacy programs was also a period of neo-liberalisation within the university sector. All disciplines with a primary focus on religion were combined into one “subject grouping”, “Theology and Religious Studies” (or TRS), regardless of their theoretical and methodological differences. This was generally received favourably by those in the more Humanistic areas of Religious Studies, for whom the aim of the discipline is primarily one of understanding, as well as by many in Theology or Biblical Studies who have tended to regard Religious Studies as “the other religions” anyway. It was less warmly received by those working with social-scientific, critical, and cognitive frameworks, with a more explanatory aim. Nevertheless, declining enrolment and research funding across the Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences meant there was broad acceptance for the presentation of a “united front” and for the two disciplines to work more closely together for mutual support (Robertson, et al., 2021: 11).

Yet institutionally, the balance of power remained with Theology, both within TRS and in public discourse. It must be remembered that in the UK context, Theology departments existed in universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh and Aberdeen for centuries before Religious Studies emerged, and are deeply implicated in the establishment, so it is more than a methodological distinction. The Churches of England and Scotland financially support a number of chairs, and there are chairs appointed by the Crown (“Regius Professors”). Theologians and biblical scholars vastly outnumber Religious Studies scholars in the British Academy even today, thus driving the TRS agenda at the university level also (Robertson, et al., 2021: 21–2). The Church of England retains a veto on what is taught in Religious Education through the Benchmarking exercise (QAA 2022), and this is not to mention...
the influence over policymaking through the “Lords Spiritual” in the unelected upper chamber of the Parliament of the United Kingdom. Moreover, the shortfall in research funding that resulted from the financial crash of 2008 is increasingly made up by independent bodies with a religious agenda such as the John Templeton Foundation, who have no mandate to ensure that different approaches are evenly supported.

Therefore, paradigms like religious literacy – as with “lived religion”, “material religion”, and “phenomenology of religion” – become dominant, because they are malleable enough that they can be used by scholars working with any theoretical approach within the TRS subject grouping, without appearing too radical to institutions and funders, while signalling a cultural diplomacy agenda that is seen as beneficial to states and to religious stakeholders. Thus, appeals to religious literacy help to shore up a subject in crisis, but arguably weaken it in so doing.

3 A Better Model: Religious Literacy as Religion Literacy

The common rhetoric that connects a lack of religious literacy with violence and intolerance seems to imply that religion itself cannot be the problem; rather, the problem is that people are merely ignorant about it. The reifying tendencies of the approach may actually reinforce the idea of religion as a discreet or even sui generis aspect of life which requires special handling. This is at odds with post-phenomenological Religious Studies which instead sees religion as a category that emerged as part of the organisational matrix of the colonial project, no more a description of a natural aspect of the world than private property is. As such, religious literacy supposes and reinforces a specific and limited idea of “religion”, which does not challenge existing hegemonies.

It is telling, I think, that the absence of “religious literacy” is not “religious illiteracy” but “religious ignorance” (Prothero 2007: 18). We might ask, who and what are we to be literate about? Are the 69% of Catholics who do not believe in literal transubstantiation religiously ignorant (Pew Research Centre 2019)? As Wolfart correctly notes, citizens of religiously diverse nations are not necessarily more knowledgeable about other religions, and in fact in such societies violence is seldom the result of tensions between different religious groups (2022: 5). Religious literacy might mean knowing that “Hindus don’t eat meat” or, better, “some Hindus don’t meat, but caste is relevant here” – but why not “Hinduism is a colonial construct that grouped a lot of different people together under one term to make it easier to govern them”? I tend to agree with Dinham and Francis when they write, “Religious literacy resides, then, in an
improved quality of conversation about the category of religion and religious belief itself, which first of all irons out all of the muddled binaries and assumptions” (2015: 14). Let’s now consider what such an approach might look like.

Instead of “knowledge about religions”, we might better promote religious literacy as knowledge of the idea of religion – what is classified as religion in any given context, and the legal and social implications of that classification. “Religion literacy”, perhaps, rather than “religious literacy”. Indeed, this is actually what other forms of literacy do. Media literacy does not train people only to see the “universal human aspects” to films or TV shows, or to help Asian and European filmmakers to work harmoniously together, but to help the consumer understand how different kinds of texts are constructed: how narratives work, how culturally specific visual and non-textual languages and expectations import meaning, how economic and technological factors constrain productions and inspire innovations.

Such a religion literacy would similarly be focused on how the category religion is constructed in different contexts; how terms like “sacred”, “ritual” or “cult” sanctify or make profane different practices, how culturally specific legal structures allow certain types of religion and constrain others, and how innovations in communication technology create new spaces for innovative religious forms. It would involve understanding that religion is only a part of a persons’ identity, that our actions and beliefs are driven by multiple influences, and that religious issues are never only about religion. Such a mode of religion literacy would be in keeping with a truly post-phenomenological Religious Studies which seeks not to understand its subject, but rather to understand how its subject is constructed and mystified, as Gender Studies or Race Studies do.

This is not merely a theoretical shift, however, there are practical aspects too. For example, it is hard to see how religious literacy as traditionally conceived could have prevented the clerical abuse scandal presently rocking the Catholic Church; but it might have come to light sooner if more people understood that religious institutions and their functionaries can avoid censure by exploiting the influence and status granted to them in being classified as a religion. Similarly, because religious beliefs are treated differently in law from other beliefs, as especially inviolable and beyond critique, we have seen widespread use of these laws to challenge vaccination, mask mandates, LGBTQ rights, and so on (e.g., de Vogue 2018; Swoyer 2021; Graham 2021).

Ironically, to make such a shift would require there to be a more sophisticated understanding of religion among policymakers, university administration and non-RS academics – the very thing that religious literacy is designed to advance. But if Religious Studies academics can begin steering the
conversation in this direction, it might be an opportunity to begin to foster that change.

References


