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## Religious education's double hermeneutic

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### ABSTRACT

This work of disambiguation begins with the simple recognition that there are 'hermeneutics' and 'hermeneutics', and argues that not all senses of the term have been given sufficient attention in the discussion of what religious education is and could be. I hope to do some important definitional work around the different senses that hermeneutics might have in religious education, and thereby to think through what it might mean to say that a concern in religious education is a 'hermeneutical' one. Finally, I hope to address the 'so what' question and make a case for the vital importance of hermeneutics for understanding religious education, as well as for understanding religion. This case lies not primarily in the association of religious education with the interpretation of scripture or more generally with questions of text or interpretation, but in the close association of education in its broadest sense with hermeneutical concerns. I sketch out the implications of a hermeneutical approach for teachers and curriculum planners faced with the tasks (which cannot be interpreted away) of selecting curriculum content and making decisions about pedagogical approach.

### KEYWORDS

Religious education;  
hermeneutics; Gadamer;  
Heidegger; knowledge;  
curriculum

### The 'double hermeneutic' in religious education

It is unsurprising that there has been a reasonably consistent engagement with the theoretical field of hermeneutics in the literature of religious education. Many religious educators, and by extension a significant proportion of scholars of RE, have an academic background in theology or in courses of religious studies that have included scriptural interpretation. They will thus have found it hard to avoid hermeneutics, conceived at least in a narrow sense as a methodology for scriptural interpretation. Much of what the RE teacher has traditionally done has rightly or wrongly concerned scriptural interpretation, which further strengthens the bond with hermeneutics. There is some recent work that stresses textual hermeneutical considerations – I am thinking of Bob Bowie's (2016, 2017, 2018) in particular – which draws attention to the subject's scriptural content. I take the main thrust of this work to be that theology has some well-established disciplinary resources for dealing with interpretive issues; to put this another way – if we are going to go about interpreting texts, there are some intelligent ways of doing this to which RE teachers should pay heed. This is important work, but it is not the focus of this article.

An important 'coming of age' for hermeneutics was the opening out of hermeneutical concerns from the understanding of texts to more general interpretive issues. In the case of the study of religion, then, there are hermeneutical questions, since what religions are is 'at issue' even for religious believers. There is thus a work of interpretation to be done both by those who profess to adhere to religions and those who would study them. Hermeneutics raises a broader set of

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questions for students of religion than simply those around the interpretation of revealed texts. This broader reach and significance of hermeneutical questions has been acknowledged in the work of Farid Panjwani (2008, 2012, 2017) for example, who stresses that the question of what it is to be a Muslim is an issue for Islam itself, and the fact that this is a live question, or is *in question*, needs to be acknowledged by anyone who would try to teach Islam (not least, in the recognition that 'Islam' as such cannot be presented to students; Panjwani recommends instead asking students to discuss the diverse ways that Muslims have addressed particular matters of faith and culture). 'Hermeneutical' concerns in the study of religion might in this sense take in criticisms of attempts to essentialise religion or engage with 'authoritative' representations of a religious tradition rather than with the diversity of its voices.

While each of these emphases – on the range of interpretive approaches to texts, and on the need for religions to be approached *interpretively* – are no doubt educationally important, neither of them engages with the distinctive contribution to hermeneutics that was made by Martin Heidegger and afterwards his student Hans-Georg Gadamer, although it is common to see citation of Gadamer (Heidegger much less so) as a central thinker in discussions of hermeneutics and religious education in the context of England and Wales. I will refer to this contribution as a 'philosophical' turn.

I invoke a 'doubling' of hermeneutics in this article not to refer to Giddens' (1984) well-known work on social science as the understanding of understandings (although this *is* a hermeneutical concern in religious education) but in the sense that although there are undoubtedly hermeneutical considerations involved in approaching religions (or whatever else we conceive the 'subject matter' of religious education to be), the happening of education itself has a hermeneutical significance. This significance has been fleshed out in philosophy of education, where writers who have made more or less explicit use of Gadamer include Gallagher (1992), Higgins (2010), Fairfield (2009, 2011a, 2011b), Dunne (1993) and Hogan (1995, 2005, 2009). But the significance of such an elaboration has largely not been taken up in religious education even by those scholars who claim to apply Gadamer.<sup>1</sup> The way that we think about religious education is transformed if we consider a hermeneutics of religion and a hermeneutics of education alongside each other.

### What makes a concern 'hermeneutical'?

The most significant aspect of philosophical hermeneutics is its widening of the scope of hermeneutics from technical considerations pertaining to the interpretation of texts to central philosophical concerns. Heidegger argues that *Dasein* (for the purposes of this article, let us substitute – with due caution – 'the human being') is 'the understanding which interprets' (1962, 62), and Gadamer elaborates that *philosophical* hermeneutics – reformulated as the attempt to offer an account of the event of understanding – constitutes the universal philosophical problem (Gadamer 1977, 2004, xxvii). One implication of this is that academic interpretations, or any self-conscious attempts to grapple with texts that have shown up as calling for interpretation, constitute specialised or explicit local instances of this more fundamental condition of human being. *Dasein* is in the condition of being 'thrown', which suggests always already being underway or impelled by pre-existing commitments and understandings which set out certain paths and possibilities for going on. This thrownness is the precondition for recognising a possibility or choosing a path, and thus it is also a projection or throwing forward; it describes both the historically conditioned and the future oriented temporality of *Dasein*.

The hermeneutical 'projection' is broader in reach than what we tend to think of as a life project, and also more pervasive. One example that is sometimes elaborated by Heideggerian interpreters is that of our approach to something as simple as making a cup of tea. A commonplace habitual action implicates us in a world of significance that is never explicitly articulated but nonetheless presupposed; this is perhaps easier to see if we compare the purposeful

movements of the Japanese tea ceremony to the way a disposable cup might be discarded when we are done with it (see Dreyfus 2006, 351). Everyday practices themselves embody an understanding of the world around us – our kitchens, our offices, our bedrooms – and the affordances or possibilities they offer us. There are times when we are aware of explicit existential decisions – when we find ourselves needing to consciously choose a life project that we know will have significant implications for our future – but these problematic moments are only able to show up as such against the background of projection that is not explicit or normally articulated. Even when we identify or commit ourselves to particular explicit ‘values’, the decision to do so (or not to do so, or to choose other values) only *matters* because an inexplicit world of significance has already claimed us. We might say that philosophical hermeneutics attempts to describe how we comport ourselves or ‘live understandingly’, and thus that hermeneutics goes *all the way down* in our consideration of what it is to be human.

‘Horizons’ in religious education have commonly been conceived in terms of the prior understandings that students bring with them to a learning situation, usually taken to mean the sum total of what they already know or believe (see, for extended examples, Wright 2000; Hookway 2002, 2004). This discussion of the phenomenon of projection draws attention to the close connection between prior knowledge and prior prejudice, commitment and motivation. All of these elements of a horizon of understanding, not just what is ‘known’, stand to play a part and to be transformed in an educational moment and together exceed what could be made explicit (or explained). This problematises attempts to separate the academic content of an educational experience – or what the teacher might ‘intend’ students beneficially to come to know or understand – from what Dewey has termed (while also emphasising their central importance over and above ‘the particular thing [the student] is studying at the time’) the ‘collateral’ elements of learning (1998, 49).

The horizon is a phenomenon to which epistemological terminology does not do justice. It is insufficient to say that a horizon combines both cognitive and affective elements. The tacit background of understanding resists attempts to thematise it or bring it to explicit articulation. Because understanding is a circular transformational moment, it becomes ‘more than a subjective act’ (Gadamer 2004, xxxiii). The one who understands is acted on by what is understood – so Gadamer describes understanding happening in the ‘in-between’ space, and both Heidegger and Gadamer stress the ‘event-like’ character of understanding; understanding transcends the efforts of those involved and ‘happens to us over and above our wanting and doing’ (xxvi). It is within this event-like conception of understanding that Gadamer’s reappropriation of ‘prejudice’ is situated. Prejudices for Gadamer are not propositional beliefs, but ‘biases of our openness to the world’ (1977, 9), which suggests orientation at the level of being rather than knowing. A characteristic of both Gadamer and Heidegger’s account is their description of understanding in topological terms – with reference to the horizon, the region and orientation. Philosophical hermeneutics describes understanding in ontological terms of openness, directedness and transformation rather than in terms of the acquisition of explicit propositional ‘content’.

Although this widening out of hermeneutical concerns into their ontological significance is central to Gadamer’s work, engagements with Gadamer in religious education in the literature of England and Wales have struggled to keep them in sight.<sup>2</sup> This is understandable. It is the task of the school teacher to explicate, to offer alternative strategies, and to elicit conscious moments of interpretation. Within this frame, it is tempting to want to think of prejudices – the preconditions of understanding – as well as what is understood, in propositional terms. Accounts of hermeneutics in RE that begin by entertaining Gadamer’s thought as a real possibility tend to slip back towards the notion that although understanding might be tacit, its contents can at least in principle be wrested from the dark background and articulated if required. In fact, most conceptions of assessment in schooling require that understanding has such ‘outcomes’.

## A hermeneutics of education

Gadamer adopts dialogue as his model for the hermeneutical moment. Even in reading, understanding occurs because we make the text 'speak' (Gadamer 2004, 370; and for a discussion of the critical disagreement passed over quietly here, see Aldridge 2015a, 87–89). Shaun Gallagher (1992) has gone as far as to suggest that *education*, rather than simply dialogue, offers the paradigmatic case of hermeneutical understanding. Gadamer writes of our engagement with a text that 'It would not deserve the interest we take in it if it did not have something to teach us that we could not know by ourselves' (2004, xxxii). The relation to what is understood is not one of a subject over against an object, but an address that holds out the possibility of an encounter with truth. Some care must be taken here, particularly when Gadamer describes the moment of understanding as reaching 'agreement' (Einverständnis). Agreement does not necessarily mean assenting to the substantive claims of the text or interlocutor, and the 'truth' of the text does not consist in its offering a 'correct' description of its subject matter (see Aldridge 2013, 2015a, 81–87). Hasty interpretation of Gadamer's use of these terms can give rise to criticisms of philosophical hermeneutics as 'conservative' or 'uncritical' (see, for example, my discussion of Wright in Aldridge 2015a, 89–100). *Einverständnis* is an agreement over the manner in which the subject matter is interpreted (an agreement that is presupposed in any attempt by an interpreter to take issue with a particular substantive claim that is made about the subject matter), and truth here refers to the text's potential to transform the one who understands by changing his or her orientation towards the subject matter.

The hermeneutic relationship is a dialogue between text or interlocutor and one who understands, in which *die Sache* – subject matter, or what is at issue between them – emerges as a third constituent. Following the philosophy of R. G. Collingwood (1978), Gadamer explains that texts do not have a once and for all or transcendent subject matter; the shared concern of text and reader emerges in the engagement. What keeps the two participants in dialogue is a willingness 'to be conducted by the subject matter' that unfolds in this space (Gadamer 2004, 360). It is worth recalling that philosophical hermeneutics does not offer a method for ensuring that interlocutors or readers remain in this relationship: the phenomenological task that Gadamer and Heidegger undertake is that of describing the conditions that obtain when understanding occurs. There are numerous ways that interlocutors can fall out of this dialogic relationship: they can cease to share what is at issue or refuse to submit to where it leads, they can talk at cross purposes or seek to insulate themselves from the claims of the other (see Gadamer 1991; Aldridge 2015a, 106–115) for a discussion of the types of 'deficient dialogue'). In a dialogue between interlocutors, there is a certain fluidity to the role of teacher, which might pass back and forth, since each stands to learn from the other about the subject matter; someone can help you to see something in a new way even if you know much more than them about it.

Gadamer describes the dialogue's relation with the subject matter in terms of 'the hermeneutic priority of the question' (2004, 356), which is not an explicitly articulable question but is also informed by the existential concept of a projection. The question describes an orientation towards the subject matter that predisposes one towards dialogue and also establishes the horizon within which understanding will happen. The sense of Gadamer's 'fusion of horizons' is not that interlocutors in dialogue (or reader and text) achieve an identical standpoint in relation to the subject matter. The reader does not occupy the same location as the text, but comes to stand in a new and related way; a shared question comes into view and the horizons of understanding are thus 'fused'. 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, 2015a, 125–129). To arrive at a shared question is always also to be brought into question.

This threefold relationship of interpreter (student), text (teacher) and shared concern (subject matter) brings to mind the ‘pedagogical’ or ‘instructional’ – what Paul Standish (2014) has also called the ‘sacred’ – triangle. The hermeneutic situation is educational in the sense that the one who understands comes to a transformed relationship with the shared concern or subject matter. A note of caution must be sounded here. Despite this relationship between the instructional triangle and hermeneutics, we should avoid too close a conflation between this triangle and the self-conscious task of teaching within which religious educators are normally implicated. Part of this caution rests on the recognition that there is teaching, and there is also what teachers do in schools. Although the hermeneutic situation is always educational, there are many attendant concerns and circumstances in the classroom that are *not* educational. There are some further important differences between the hermeneutic situation conceived as a pedagogical triangle and the interactions of teacher, student and subject matter in the classroom. Perhaps it is better to say, given that hermeneutics goes ‘all the way down’ and therefore pervades such situations, that there are complications or multiplications of the hermeneutic situation.

I have discussed these complications in detail (Aldridge 2011, 2015a, 119–125). Here I have at least introduced the hermeneutical insight that subject matter is never ‘given’ but emerges in the event of understanding. In an explicit or self-conscious teaching situation, subject matter – understood as what is at issue between teacher and student – cannot be simply ‘presented’ to students. It cannot be known in advance of the educational engagement. What is presented to students is a certain object of learning selected with a pedagogical intention. Or rather, to draw on an insight from Mollenhauer (2014), teachers do not present the world but offer representations of the world – exemplars and reductions selected to convey some element of what is important to us in situations we know to be irreducibly complex. In the classroom or schooling situation, then, the relevant triangular relationship needs to be construed as comprising teacher, student and the ‘object of study’ – some text, stimulus or problem that the teacher has chosen with pedagogical intent. But we have not yet introduced a shared concern or subject matter. Since the student must understand both object of study and teacher, and the teacher must understand and respond to the student, and seeks also to convey his or her understanding of what is important in the object of study, each of the three sides of this triangle is a hermeneutic situation in which some shared concern emerges. While there are many possibilities for understanding across this constellation (students can, after all, learn something even as they ignore their teacher and/or the object of study), something of the teacher’s pedagogical intention is vindicated at the point where there is some convergence of understanding across the three related hermeneutic situations – that is, if a subject matter emerges that is shared across the relationships of teacher-student, teacher-object and student-object.

The educational convergence of teacher, student and object of study on a shared concern (what I am later going to elaborate as a moment of ‘belonging’) may well be fragile or fleeting. Both teacher and student might often be conscious of working hard at something, but understanding is not the achievement of either teacher or student; it ‘befalls’ them or transcends their individual efforts. The shared concern cannot be explicitly captured or rendered propositionally, nor can it be known in advance. The teacher is trying to entice the student into a new orientation towards the world, but must adjust his or her efforts in response to the shared concern that is being disclosed in the interaction between them. The to-and-fro interaction can be likened to a dance, or even a courtship (Hogan 1995, 2009). This account of education is in tension, I concede, with the responsibility of schooling to achieve predetermined learning outcomes. It will be interrupted and risks being dispelled by the teacher invoking his or her institutional authority to ensure that learning returns to or progresses in accordance with the predefined scheme, or follows

propositionally defined routines of assessment. Education happens, that is to say, in spite of our explicit and technical efforts.

### Joining it up – what is ‘educational’ in religious education?

The attempt to combine a hermeneutics of education with a hermeneutics of religion will not get far if it proceeds by making the assumption that the subject matter of religious education is religions or God. To make this assumption too hastily is rather to miss the point of much that has preceded. Let us retain the important distinction between an object of study and the subject matter of an engagement (in the hermeneutical sense of *die Sache*, the matter that is at issue or the emergent shared concern). Claims for the particular importance of hermeneutics in religious education might be thought to rest on the special ineffability of its divine subject matter (Lewin 2017). Such claims assume too much and also miss how an engagement with hermeneutics makes a mystery more generally of educational subject matter. Subject matter is questionable, in question, and indeterminate. It has its own sacred quality.

What can be known or specified in advance is a collection of objects of study or curriculum objects. Such objects are selected with a pedagogical intention, or – which perhaps happens more often – they are encountered as ‘given’ by a teacher and must then be appropriated with some pedagogical intention. The rationale for the selection of curriculum objects might be an intention to disclose some selected aspect of the world – the nature of God, the spiritual life, transcendent reality, religions as social objects – or instrumental aims such as promoting social cohesion or moral development. Such rationales might be more or less coherent, intermingled and explicit, and are unlikely to survive untransformed in the passage from one curriculum creator to another. They are much less likely to survive contact with children, who will not acknowledge curricular or disciplinary distinctions, and will bring additional ways of ‘framing’ the objects presented to them.

The hermeneutical approach is not to see this situation as a problem that will be solved by identifying and justifying the correct frame within which to place curriculum objects. This is how I have characterised, for example, the encounter between Robert Jackson and Andrew Wright (see Aldridge 2015a; Jackson 2004; Wright 2007). Wright applies the charge of religious nominalism to Jackson, who in return levels the charge of essentialism at Wright’s claim that religions must have discrete ‘prototypical identities’ (Jackson 2004, 155). But what is really at issue is how each scholar frames the RE encounter, which has to do with what each places into the triangular positions of student, curriculum object and shared concern. Wright frames the encounter as a dialogue between student and religions (the curriculum objects) *about* the nature of transcendent reality (the shared concern), whereas Jackson puts the student in a relationship with particular instantiations of religion (the believer, the text, the community) where the shared concern – the emerging subject matter – is religion. Each explicit frame is motivated by a powerful insight – Jackson’s that we never encounter or present a religion ‘as such’, and that our understanding of ‘religions’ must itself be in a part-whole hermeneutical relation, and Wright’s that the claims that religions make *about* the way things are should, and inevitably will, play a part in religious understanding. Claims to the exclusiveness of their frames leads each to foreclose in advance the possible subject matter that can emerge in RE. Jackson, for example, argues that judgements about transcendent reality might sometimes result but cannot be an aim of religious education, and Wright excludes certain curriculum objects from primary consideration on the grounds that they do not properly make claims about transcendent reality (Wright 2004, 212; Aldridge 2015b). The hermeneutical insight is that such frames cannot contain a student’s possible range of understanding, and that there will be an interaction or movement between these frames, and others, in the hermeneutical moment. The teacher has limited control over how a selected curriculum object will serve as an ‘exemplar’ of an intended pedagogical rationale, in which one frame might recede into the background of understanding and another become foregrounded. In fact, the teacher does have the power to intervene here – by interrupting the student’s understanding and insisting on a particular explicit frame, or a



particular transition from one curriculum object to another that implies a particular frame, but doing so will always be at the expense of what is educational in the exchange.

To attempt to contain the questionability of a curriculum object is to constrain its educational value (although we often do this, for the sake of 'success' in schooling). This insight into the dialogic questionability of a particular stimulus, or textual extract, or artefact, can be extended to the total collection of objects – the curriculum as a whole. The hermeneutical approach to religious education's place on a school curriculum and its proper contents will seem radical and unhelpful perhaps to those who feel keenly that RE's discrete curriculum space is under attack, but is far from unknown within curriculum studies (see, for example, Pinar 2012, 179–204). There is an understandable desire among scholars of RE to build the selection of curriculum objects anew from indisputable foundations (perhaps in the context of a 'total curriculum' where the contribution of each subject or curriculum area has been explicitly articulated). A view on curriculum informed by philosophical hermeneutics, however, would resist attempts to give a once and for all or transcendent justification of a curriculum area. The curriculum, we could say, instantiates a set of commitments or 'prejudices' about what has value and what is worth spending time thinking and talking about. These prejudices are historically effected, and are never successfully articulated or explicated in the ad hoc rationales that 'justify' curriculum. These prejudices are not fixed and determined but are disclosed and transformed precisely through the hermeneutical engagement that is teaching. The value of a curriculum area is not given for each individual student. Moreover, broader social contexts change; it is possible for a curriculum area to grow old or cease to speak to the group of students whose good it is expected to serve.

### So what, for religious education?

The landscape of schooling has been dominated recently by a political rhetoric that seeks to restore the status of the school as a site of 'traditional' learning unhampered by instrumental social agendas, and in which the ideal of the 'knowledge-led' or 'knowledge-rich' curriculum – often drawing on E D Hirsch's 'core knowledge' (Hirsch 1988, 1999) or Michael Young's 'powerful knowledge' (Young 2014) – finds growing support over 'pupil-centred' or 'developmental' approaches (Gibb 2015; Gove 2013). One contributor to the RE Council's recent interim report on Religious Education insists that RE 'ought to be an academic discipline with the same systematic demands and the same rigour as other disciplines' (Chilvers 2017, 59); we perhaps detect a note of embarrassment or frustration here at religious education's relatively recent history of policy and guidance. The report is at pains to avoid the expectation that religious education carries any particular moral or other developmental responsibility, or that it might be expected to make more of a contribution to developing community cohesion or 'British values' than other curriculum areas. Although the report acknowledges the influence of Grimmitt's (1987) twofold aim of 'learning about' and 'learning from' religions, which became – via the SCAA model syllabuses of 1994 – almost a commonplace in agreed syllabuses and guidance documents, it follows a recent trend (see also REC 2013) of avoiding the use of 'learning from', preferring instead to refer to the possibility of students' 'reflecting on' or 'working out' their own worldview (Chilvers 2017, 22, 28).

In an edited volume published only a couple of months after the interim report, a group of 'emerging and established leaders in the theory and practice of religious education' were invited to offer their 'much-needed' manifestos for the future of the subject (Castelli and Chater 2017, 11). One contribution, on 'Religious Education and the "Knowledge Problem"', channels many of the currents to which I have been drawing attention (Kueh 2017). Its author draws attention to 'questions about [RE's] academic rigour and intellectual pedigree' that accompanied debates about its non-inclusion within the English Baccalureate in 2012 and that have not been aided by the 'historical complexity' of the theory and practice of RE (54). Kueh condemns Grimmitt's 'learning from' aim on the grounds that it contains 'overly optimistic, liberal assumptions about religion, derived from the confessional past, which are becoming increasingly defective and



unreliable' (55). Kueh's contention is that the assumption that 'one can and should learn' from every form of religious expression is flawed in a 'post-apartheid, post-9/11, post-ISIS/Daesh' global landscape 'where the various (and darker) facets of religion and belief need to be accounted for within a framework of understanding, just as much as the brighter ones' (55). Kueh's response to the question of 'subject-rationale' and attendant confusion is to advocate a 'knowledge-based curriculum that focuses upon the intrinsic value of that knowledge' (56), upon which he acknowledges the primary influence of Michael Young's 'powerful knowledge'. He also cites Mary Earl's hope of 'reframing Religious Education (RE) so that we align it as closely as possible to other subjects on the school curriculum' (2015, 4, cited in Kueh 2017, 65). There is in both documents the overall sense of a subject that has for a long time expressed some important differences in its conception of learning from other academic areas, and upon which unreasonable demands have therefore been made, but which ought in fact to have to work no harder for curriculum space than any of its competitors (in spite of its unique status of being compulsory through all stages of state maintained schooling).

I want to relate to these concerns the particular insights of philosophical hermeneutics and the 'doubling' of a hermeneutics of education and of religion. What comes into view in the first instance is the cost (from the perspective of a hermeneutics of education) involved in achieving 'clarity' over the aims of religious education; this would involve privileging one framing of curriculum objects over another. Such clarity and attendant framing is conceivable and achievable, but would interrupt and foreclose possibilities for understanding those objects in service of technological considerations of schooling: assessment or measurement, accountability, predictability and comparison. One way of achieving such clarity would be to align religious education with a particular academic discipline (theology is a popular choice at present – see, for example, Lewis 2017). At first glance this seems harmless and even necessary: one must have a way in – a disciplinary 'method' – to selecting and presenting curriculum objects. So religious education could be reconceived as an education in theology (or alternatively philosophy, religious studies, etc.) But adopting a disciplinary perspective as a contingent (almost arbitrary) pedagogical starting point is quite different from locking it in as a curriculum frame.

I have argued above that for a dialogue to follow its subject matter requires the possibility that the frame will shift. A theological discussion about the nature of God or the divine could become, depending on the transformation of the interlocutors in relation to the subject matter (Aldridge 2015b), a discussion about the historical and materialistic explanations for why so many people might have assented to the 'delusion' that God exists or that there is a divine reality. This dialogue might have moved – as it often does in the public sphere – out of the domain of the disciplinary commitments of theology and into history and sociology, but it continues to be characterised by the submission of the interlocutors to its emerging subject matter. To exclude, or even minimise, such concerns as not properly theological seems to value the discipline over the dialogue. The same goes for other frames than the theological: for example if humanistic or atheist perspectives are minimised in RE on the grounds that their concern is not properly religion, spirituality or the transcendent (see Barnes 2015; Aldridge 2015b). Aligning religious education with an academic discipline serves to conveniently answer and 'lock in' questions about proper objects of study, the content of exam specifications, and so on, but does so at the expense of a transformative educational dialogue.

Those concerned with the 'academic rigour' of religious education may be worried at this point. But to emphasise the inadequacy of discipline for framing a curriculum subject is not to denigrate the importance of disciplinary methods for understanding. There is certainly a sense in the documents discussed above that the balance in RE of 'knowledge centred' and 'student centred' concerns (sometimes connected with 'learning about' and 'learning from' respectively) needs to tip towards knowledge after an extended period of over-concern with student relevance, empathy and interest. The hermeneutic account of education elaborated above can say a great deal about this balance. Philosophical hermeneutics emphasises that understanding precedes from a horizon – so

engaging a student's 'prejudices' is a necessary condition of education – but concedes, with Oakeshott (1989), that the educational 'conversation' must take students beyond their limited experience and interests. What hermeneutics adds to this well-rehearsed discussion is the recognition that considerations of 'balance' cannot be resolved by a technical application of 'subject pedagogical knowledge' or known in advance of an educational moment, since students are not transformed by their engagement with the object of study in the way that the teacher originally 'intends'. Emphasising the responsiveness of the teacher's educational intention (the teacher must in fact be open to 'learning from' his or her students) does not lead us into a 'student-led' pedagogy. A teacher's dialogic engagement with a student transforms his or her understanding of what is 'at work' in the object of study for that student.

I have referred to the moment in which a shared concern emerges across the constellation of hermeneutical relationships in education as one of 'belonging' (Aldridge 2015a). Here I intend an allusion to Gadamer's claim that participants in a dialogue 'belong' to its subject matter, where the German (*gehören*) carries also the sense of hearkening or being guided. I acknowledge that the term 'belonging' has its own history in RE – as a 'dimension' of religion – that I am simply discounting here. A 'pedagogy for belonging' in religious education would be guided not by technical concerns but by ethical ones: a teacher's commitment both to the individuality of the student and to the subject matter, or to the emergence of truth in dialogue. Here hermeneutics accounts for a phenomenon that is familiar to experienced teachers or to those who have watched them; that of the teacher's knowing how to go on when the classroom dialogue could go one way or another. Sometimes we observe that an explicit judgement is made – 'this question could take me on a diversion, what kind of answer can I give that will not require too much additional exposition?' – but all such judgements take place against a background of masterful activity which includes a teacher's tacit awareness of what is at work in the subject matter for individual students, and the imagination to see possibilities for discussion that will be authentic both to the object of study presented and to the horizons and motivations for students' enquiries. This kind of knowledge, embedded in practice, has been called the 'tact' of the teacher because it exhausts what might be captured in explicit propositions or technical descriptions (van Manen 1991). A 'pedagogy for belonging' could not be presented to beginner teachers as a methodology to guide them in making explicit decisions about (for example) when to develop further disciplinary knowledge and approaches, when to teach more about the 'tradition' in which the object of study is situated, and when to draw on a familiar example from a student's experience. But it could be supported in further research by a celebration of, and enquiry into, the tactful mastery of experienced RE teachers who display an ethical commitment to education's 'belonging' to its subject matter.

What precedes might hopefully go some way towards showing the limitations of the pedagogies of 'knowledge' that are increasing in popularity in the RE discussion in England and Wales, without risking any concomitant charge of intellectual impoverishment. Philosophical hermeneutics offers an account of a transformational education that exceeds what could be captured or described in terms of core propositional knowledge. It also demonstrates the inadequacy of attempts to furnish a foundational 'background' of propositionally defined cultural literacy (Hirsch 1988). Such attempts would take place against, and assume, their own background; educators and students are always already in the circle. Attempts to identify the requisite knowledge with the practices of a particular academic discipline will also be inadequate to an educational justification of RE. Addressing problems of the nomenclature and proper content of religious education with reference to the increasingly popular language of 'worldviews' will also need more attention from a hermeneutical perspective. There is a lack of clarity in the application of this term in RE over whether it refers to those explicit and coherent narratives that some (but hardly all) religious and spiritual adherents hold about how 'it all' fits together, or the background of inexplicit commitments against which such a narrative could be discerned. The latter could be identified with the phenomenological background of hermeneutics, but could hardly

become the unifying rationale for the selection of objects of study in a curriculum (see Aldridge 2015a for further discussion).

### Conclusion: what's 'in it' for them?

Hermeneutical considerations about curriculum are not specific to religious education. The contingency of disciplinary 'givens' applies across the curriculum, where those concerned with extending or transforming students' horizons must be open to the 'questionability' of their offering. But we have seen how the hermeneutics of religion and of scriptural interpretation might incline teachers of RE in particular to go a little way with an educational hermeneutics. We know to approach our particular objects of study dialogically. A hermeneutic approach to religion reminds us that RE teachers do not present 'Islam' or 'Christianity', but some of the ways that Christians and Muslims interpret their own faiths. They do not ever present the Bible, or the Qur'an, but *a* way, or some of the ways in which the Bible and the Qur'an have been interpreted and received, and they do not present the 'Christian' or 'Muslim' ruling on war, or sexuality, or gender equality, but involve themselves, explicitly or not, in hermeneutical complexities. Of course other subjects also have their more explicit hermeneutical issues.

To attend to the 'double hermeneutic' of religious education is to recognise that even as we consider how to approach an object of study hermeneutically, we are implicated in a further hermeneutical circle – the object of study itself has been selected or framed by a contingent rationale that becomes questionable in the engagement with the student. The educational question is not whether to present 'Islam' or 'Muslims', although that is an important question about representational adequacy. The educational question concerns what it is in the representation of Islam or Muslims that stands to speak to the student. There is in this recognition something of a liberation for a teacher concerned with the justification and rationale of a particular collection of curriculum objects: this question can be asked at whatever contingent curricular starting point we might choose. It is always asked anew in the educational moment.

### Notes

1. Bowie and Panjwani have already been mentioned. The most sustained engagement with Gadamer in RE, apart from in my own work, has been in that of Wright (1997, 1998, 2000, 2007). Jackson expressed an initial antipathy to Gadamer's version of hermeneutics (1997) but is more kindly disposed towards it at a later stage (2004).
2. European engagements have been much more sensitive to the ontological significance of philosophical hermeneutics. See, for example, Hermans (2004) and Meijir (2004).

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### Notes on contributor

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