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Chapter 1:
The Interpretive Approach to Religious Education and the Development of a Community of Practice

The practitioners and researchers whose work is reported in this book have come together as a community of practice around particular principles and methods of education and research. The interpretive approach to religious education and a given model of action research provided common organising principles for the design, implementation and interpretation of the community's diverse projects but they did not provide a rigid framework. Instead individual projects and shared reflections became testing grounds for them both. This book documents a development of thinking about the interpretive approach and action research so that the version of both presented in the later chapters will be seen to differ in some respects from the models from which the Warwick community of practice set out. It is therefore appropriate to begin this book with two chapters that explain the project's starting points, the origins and initial formulations of those models.

The Emergence of the Interpretive Approach

The interpretive approach was developed originally for use in religious education in publicly funded community schools in England and Wales, where the subject is primarily concerned with helping pupils to gain a critical and reflective understanding of religions. My book, *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach* (Jackson 1997), was the first text to give a detailed articulation of the interpretive approach to the study of religious diversity in schools. Since then, the approach has been used and developed further both in the UK, and in a variety of contexts in Europe and beyond.[1] It is not intended as a replacement or substitute for other approaches, and it has always been emphasised that the interpretive approach is not advanced as *the* approach to religious education or to wider treatments of religion in education[2], but as a contribution to theoretical, methodological and pedagogical debates (e.g. Jackson 1997, p. 6) and as complementary to some other approaches (Jackson 2004, 2006b). This inherent flexibility made it an appropriate starting point for the diverse projects and contexts of the members of the Warwick community of practice.

My experience of engaging in ethnographic field studies of a way of life very different from my own (initially 'Hinduism' in an English city) changed my views about theory and method in qualitative research in religion, and in publicly funded

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1   The interpretive approach has been used in Norway, Germany, Canada and Japan as well as in a Council of Europe project (Council of Europe 2004; Keast 2007) and the REDCo project.

2   Of course, in some European countries, for example France, there is no school subject called religious education, and issues of religion may be dealt with through lessons in history or social studies.

religious education provided for a diverse population. The book *Religious Educa-tion: An Interpretive Approach* (Jackson 1997) summarised ideas developed from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s during several research studies of children from different religious and ethnic backgrounds in Britain and applied them to issues concerning religious education in schools.[3]

Participation in ethnographic fieldwork led to questioning the theoretical position of the phenomenology of religion (as articulated by its 'classical' exponents), its practical usefulness as a research tool, and its efficacy as a method and approach for religious education (Jackson 1997, pp. 7-29). The more philoso-phical versions of the phenomenology of religion had posited universal ideal types or 'essences', embedded in human consciousness and known subjectively through intuition (e.g. van der Leeuw 1938). Although expressed in different cultural and historical contexts, the 'essence' of religion was regarded as universal, and its various 'ideal types' – seen almost as Platonic forms or ideas – were expressed through particular examples. Thus, although found in different cultural or historical situations, the meaning of these essences was held to be constant, and could be uncovered through the processes of suspending one's own presuppositions and empathising with the 'other', whether through engaging with a text or an example of living religion. There was no questioning of language used. Western (and primarily Christian) terminology tended to be projected on to a wide variety of material in some very different contexts (Jackson 1997, pp. 14-24).

The experience of fieldwork pointed up the limitations of the theory and methods of the phenomenology of religion. In brief, the practice of fieldwork showed that terminology and symbols used by adherents rarely had direct equiva-lents to the Western terminology that had been used by phenomenologists of religion. Now, the issue of interpretation was seen as *primarily linguistic and symbolic*, a matter of grasping how language and symbols were used, rather than intuitive. Both the persons being studied and the researcher were living within social and historical contexts. Rather than being a 'disengaged consciousness', the non-Hindu western researcher could only start with current language and under-standings and take as much care as possible not to superimpose pre-conceived meanings on to new material. Grasping the meaning of terms and symbols depended on observing their *use in context*. Interpretation required, not the sus-pension of presuppositions (how can one be confident of knowing one's own presuppositions?), but rather comparison and contrast of unfamiliar terms used by adherents with one's own familiar concepts (Geertz 1983). Additionally, inter-pretation required placing particular examples of religious practice or belief within a wider context. At its narrowest, this could be checking one occurrence against others not relevantly different. More generally, it involved broader contextualiza-tion (is this ritual/practice/belief/role characteristic of a particular group or combi-nation of groups, or does it occur more widely?) or analysing the example in

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3   Studies specifically of children from a Hindu background, together with some of the theory contributing to the interpretive approach, had already influenced the structure and contents of *Approaches to Hinduism* (Jackson & Killingley 1988) and two books for children which drew on the research material (Jackson, 1989a; Jackson & Nesbitt 1990); the methodologies of these texts are discussed in Jackson, 1989b. A detailed report on the research on Hindu children was published in 1993, including material discussing the con-cept of 'Hinduism' and various methodological issues (Jackson & Nesbitt 1993).

relation to one's understanding of the religious tradition understood at its broadest – in this case one's current understanding of 'Hinduism'.

Research was now acknowledged to be a reflexive and dialogical process. In other words, the process of trying to grasp someone else's terminology was not simply about understanding their use of signs – whether words or symbols – but included a questioning of *one's own* understanding and use of terms, such as 'religion', 'religions' and 'Hinduism' and a critical interest in the historical development of this terminology, especially since the eighteenth century. This history includes the development of the fields of comparative religion and phenomenology of religion, the emergence of the names of some of the religions – including Hinduism (Jackson 1996; Jackson & Killingley 1988; Jackson & Nesbitt 1993) – in the nineteenth century, the use in religious studies and religious education of expressions such as 'religions of the world' and 'world religions' in the twentieth century (Jackson 1997, pp. 49-60), and a tendency to portray these religions as essentialised, homogeneous belief systems.[4]

It was my experience of ethnographic research on 'Hinduism' that called for a more flexible way of representing religious material than found in comparative religion or the phenomenology of religion. W. C. Smith's book *The Meaning and End of Religion* was an inspirational source, in which 'religion' was represented in terms of an interplay between individual 'faith' and cumulative tradition (Smith 1978).[5] I also introduced the notion of 'membership groups', an idea that transforms Smith's idea of tradition. 'Membership groups' are not collections of isolated individuals, but are interactive networks of communication through which, for example, religious language and tradition are mediated to the young (Jackson 1997, pp. 96-104; Jackson & Nesbitt 1993). 'Religions' were not seen as belief systems, with necessary and sufficient conditions for inclusion, but as broad religious traditions, reference points for individuals and groups, whose shape and borders are often contested, but with descriptive content. The character of specific religious traditions as 'wholes' varies; the 'structure' of 'Hinduism' is different from that of 'Christianity', for example. Nevertheless, we can speak meaningfully of 'religions' or 'religious traditions' that are related by family resemblance and have in common some reference to the transcendence of ordinary human experience.

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4 The work of Edward Said, in particular, alerted me to the element of power as one factor in the formation and representation of religions – whether by 'outsiders' (including writers of travelogues, histories and research reports) or 'insiders' of different kinds (Jackson 1997, pp. 55-57; Said 1978).

5 However, I did not adopt Smith's views on faith, tradition and religious language. Whereas Smith advocated the removal of words such as 'religion', 'religions' and 'Hinduism' from scholarly use, I accepted that these and many other English terms should be used, but flexibly and critically. I did not adopt Smith's concept of 'faith' (preferring reference to the self-orientation of individuals – for example in relation to the transcendent – in the context of their own groups and tradition).

Theory, Method and Pedagogy

The development of this work had theoretical, methodological and pedagogical dimensions. *Theoretically*, it raised questions about the representation and interpretation of religions, and about reflexivity, seeing religious studies and religious education as hermeneutical and dialogical activities.

Theoretically and methodologically, it drew on social anthropology, especially the interpretive anthropology of Clifford Geertz (e.g. 1983), itself influenced by literary criticism and the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur (eg. Geertz 1973). There was also some influence from some of Geertz's critics working within anthropology (e.g. Clifford 1986). The process of interpreting the ways of life of others was seen, not as 'hard science' but as a systematic, ethical, reflexive and self-critical process. *The pedagogical dimension* developed from reflecting on the theory and method in a research context and applying the ideas to children's learning. Thus, a fundamental aim for religious education was 'to develop an understanding of the grammar – the language and wider symbolic patterns – of religions and the interpretive skills necessary to gain that understanding' (Jackson 1997, p. 133). This 'necessitated the development of critical skills which would open up issues of representation and interpretation as well as questions of truth and meaning' and also involved a reflexive element, in which young people were given the opportunity to relate learning to their own views and understandings, to formulate critical comments and to review the methods of study they had been using (Jackson 1997, pp. 133-134, 2004, pp. 88-89). The following summary of the key concepts of representation, interpretation and reflexivity emphasises pedagogy.

Representation

While it does not abandon the use of the language of 'religions' or claim that 'religions' as 'wholes' are incapable of description, the interpretive approach is critical of representations which essentialise or stereotype them. A model for representing religious material is developed which encourages an exploration of the relationship between individuals in the context of their religious and cultural groups (Tajfel 1981) and to the wider religious tradition. The *religion or religious tradition* is seen as a tentative and contested 'whole', and it is recognized that different insiders (and outsiders) might have varying understandings of the nature and scope of particular religious traditions. *Individuals* relate to various groups. *Groups* are of different, sometimes overlapping, types (sub-traditions, 'streams', denominations, ethnic groups, sects and movements, castes, families, peer groups etc. [Jackson 1997, pp. 64-65]). Groups are *communicative*. It is at the group level that social and linguistic interaction occurs, and that tradition is communicated. Groups provide the context for the processes of 'transmission', 'nurture' and 'socialisation' that were investigated in various research projects based at the University of Warwick. These processes are *interactive* and take place in social contexts (Jackson & Nesbitt 1993; Nesbitt 2004).

Young people interact with parents, community leaders, peers from the same background, texts, spiritual teachers etc. They also interact with other sources of value, and the types and degrees of interaction may vary over time.[6]

Examining the interplay between individuals in the context of their groups and the wider tradition offers a view of religions that acknowledges their complexity and internal diversity, including their varying interactions with 'culture'. The personal and group-tied elements of religions are emphasized, with religion being presented as part of lived human experience. The approach is not relativistic in relation to truth, aiming for a procedural epistemological openness and acknowledging varying and often competing truth claims (e.g. Jackson 1997, pp. 122-126).

Interpretation

The interpretive methodology relates closely to work in recent interpretive anthropology/ethnography. Rather than asking researchers or learners to leave their presuppositions to one side, the method requires a comparison and contrast between the researcher's/learner's concepts and those of people being studied. Sensitivity on the part of the student is regarded as a necessary condition, with empathy only being possible once the terms and symbols of the other's discourse have been grasped.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is understood here as the relationship between the experience of researchers/students and the experience of those whose way of life they are attempting to interpret. Three aspects of reflexivity have been identified as applicable within the interpretive approach to religious education. Firstly, learners are encouraged to review their understanding of their *own* way of life (edification). Secondly, they are helped to make a constructive critique of the material studied at a distance; and thirdly, they are involved in reviewing their methods of study.

Edification

Anthropologists have written about how their studies of others have prompted some form of re-assessment of their understanding of their *own* ways of life (e.g. Leach 1982, p. 127). In the interpretive approach, the term 'edification' was used to describe this form of learning.[7]

This reflexive activity is not easy in practice to separate from the process of interpretation. Interpretation might start from the other's language and experience, then move to that of the student, and then move back and forth between the two. Thus the activity of grasping another's way of life is inseparable in practice from that of pondering on the issues and questions raised by it. Such reflexive activity is personal to the student and teachers cannot guarantee that it will happen. They can,

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6   See Geir Skeie's usage of 'traditional plurality' for the presence of several religions and worldviews within the same society, and 'modern plurality' for the shifting between different rationalities that takes place within the individual (Skeie 1995)

7   This concept has some features in common with Michael Grimmitt's idea of 'learning from' religion but is not identical to it (see Grimmitt 1987, p. 225; Jackson 1997, pp. 131-132).

however, ensure that such activity is not stifled, by providing structured opportunities for reflection. It is also the case that making this type of connection often helps to motivate students to participate more fully in religious education. As Kevin O'Grady has demonstrated in his action research with secondary pupils in the north of England (O'Grady 2003, 2005), a religious education disconnected from pupils' own questions and concerns is very likely to fail to engage and to motivate them.

Edification need not only result from studying religions or cultures other than one's own. As Wilna Meijer (2004) has noted in relation to religious education, and Barbara Myerhoff (1978) has demonstrated in her anthropological research, the study of *one's own* ancestral tradition, in religious or cultural terms, can also give new insights in re-examining one's sense of identity. In the case of religious education, young people might see religions, including the one of their own history, from a new perspective. Ethnographic source material, plus data from locally conducted studies, could provide a basis for this, as could historical material (whether from local or wider sources).[8]

Being edified by studying religious material does not imply *adopting* the beliefs of followers of that religion. It does, however, build upon a genuinely positive attitude towards diversity, seeing the meeting between people with different beliefs and practices as enriching for all, and seeing individual identity as being developed through meeting 'the other'.

Constructive Criticism

Reflexivity also involves engaging critically with material studied. Managing such critical work is a sensitive pedagogical issue, especially in pluralistic classrooms. Criticism can also be applied fruitfully to method. Just as researchers should spend time reflecting on the effectiveness and the ethics of the methods they have used, so a critique of religious education methods should be part of its content. This methodological self-awareness can reveal issues of representation and can also stimulate creative ideas for improvement, in the presentation of findings to others, for example.

Developments

Initially the pedagogical ideas, and the data from the ethnographic studies conducted by Jackson and his colleagues were used in the development of curriculum texts (collectively the Warwick RE Project) written for children of different ages (e.g. Barratt 1994a, b; Barratt & Price 1996a, b; Everington 1996a, b; Jackson, Barratt & Everington 1994; Mercier 1996; Wayne et al. 1996). The books aimed to help learners (and teachers) to use interpretive methods in engaging with ethnographic data on children from religious backgrounds, portrayed in the context of the

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8   Meijer points out that the approach is not only relevant to studies of contemporary religion; it can also be used 'historically', in revisiting lost or forgotten aspects of tradition and facilitating young people's reappraisal of it. (Meijer, 2004). Her observation is consistent with the project's approach to 'edification' (see below under reflexivity).

communities in which they lived and the wider religious tradition to which they related.

Subsequently, the broad approach has been (and continues to be) developed in a number of directions. In relation to pedagogy, these include pupil-to-pupil dialogue (e.g. Ipgrave 2001; McKenna, Ipgrave & Jackson 2008), and using students' concerns and questions as a starting point for the exploration of religious material as a means to foster student motivation (O'Grady 2003, 2005; see also chapter 2 below).

The REDCo Project

As stated earlier, the interpretive approach provides theoretical stimulus for research and pedagogical development within a European Commission Framework 6 project (REDCo) on religion, education, dialogue and conflict (Jackson, Miedema, Weisse & Willaime 2007). In this project the interpretive approach was used as a source for questions to be applied *both* to field research methods and to pedagogy. Each group of questions corresponds to one of the three key concepts of the approach.

Representation. As researchers and developers of pedagogies:
- How well are we portraying the way of life of those we are studying so we avoid misrepresentation and stereotyping?
- Are we presenting 'religions' in too monolithic a way?
- Are we giving sufficient attention to diversity within religions?
- Are we considering whether individuals might be drawing on a wider range of spiritual or ethical resources than are reflected in traditional portrayals of religions?
- Are we showing awareness that individuals might be combining elements from a religion seen in traditional terms with values and assumptions derived from a more post-modern outlook?
- How far are we aware of the perceived relationship (or lack of relationship) of individuals studied to background religious and cultural traditions?
- How far does the use of power by relevant authorities/actors (national, regional, local) affect the representation of 'others' and 'self'/'own group/tradition'?

Interpretation. As researchers and developers of pedagogies:
- How far are we giving attention to the religious language/concepts/symbols used by those whom we are studying/representing?
- How well are we 'translating' the other person's concepts and ideas (or comparing the other person's language/concepts with our own nearest equivalent language/concepts) so we have a clear understanding of them?
- How far are we able to empathise with the experience of others after we have grasped their language/concepts/symbols?
- Have we considered the relationship of individuals to groups to which they belong (e.g. sub-tradition, sect, denomination, movement, caste, ethnic group) and of these groups to their background religious and cultural traditions?

- Have we considered the impact of power relations on processes of inter-
  pretation?
- How far have we considered issues of 'translation' (linguistic and cultural) in
  relation our use of religious language?

Reflexivity. As researchers:
- How far are we aware of the impact of our own cultural background/values and
  beliefs/gender/research role/power etc. on the research process or development
  of pedagogical ideas?
- How far are we relating the data of our research to our own current understand-
  ings of difference?
- How far are we giving attention to the evaluation of our research methods?

In relation to pedagogy
- How far are we enabling students and teachers to reflect on their own assump-
  tions/presuppositions/prejudices in relation to studying those with different reli-
  gious/cultural beliefs/practices?
- How far are we giving attention to issues of enabling students and teachers to
  relate material studied to their own ideas and values?
- How far are we giving attention to issues of motivation in relation to reflex-
  ivity?
- How far have we enabled students and teachers to make a careful, sensitive and
  distanced critique of new ideas studied?

Within the wider REDCo project, these questions have been pursued across various
countries and in relation to themes including pupil identity, dialogue, conflict,
gender, teacher and curriculum development and educational policy. In the next
chapter and for the remainder of this book, our attention is turned to the investiga-
tion of the interpretive approach through the Warwick REDCo Community of
Practice.

Developing an Action Research Community of Practice

The key concepts of the interpretive approach have provided stimulus for a group
of studies being conducted by members of a 'community of practice' as a specific
UK contribution to the wider REDCo Project. The concept of a community of
practice refers to the process of social learning that occurs when people who have a
common interest in a subject or problem collaborate over an extended period to
share ideas, find solutions, and build innovations (Wenger 1998). Our studies com-
bine insights from the interpretive approach with theory and method related to
action research, as conducted by Kevin O'Grady (e.g. 2007a, 2008, chapter 2
below) in developing pedagogies that foster dialogue and address religious conflict.
The work of the community of practice includes the articulation and development
of the shared concepts of the interpretive approach, and working out how to apply
them consistently, clearly and critically in a variety of contexts, including primary

and secondary classrooms, teacher education courses and the continuing professional development of teachers (O'Grady 2007b).

In our deliberations on the term 'community of practice', certain ideas were prominent. We experienced different forms of 'situated learning' (Wenger 1998): the group included 'novice researchers' who 'learned by doing' alongside more experienced ones, but all members gained insights into power relations and the processes of conceptual transmission (Judith Everington reports these processes in chapter 12, below). As with action research, the notion of a community of practice has been open to various interpretations and applications. Geir Skeie, innovatively, uses Wenger's ideas of reification and participation as tools to *analyse* our data (see chapter 14, below)

Members of the community of practice met regularly for research workshops, presenting research updates, supporting and criticizing each other's studies and reflecting on methodological issues. In addition to the individual studies, second level analysis considers generic issues raised by the studies. At a third level, the studies have been placed in conversation with REDCo's emerging European perspective.

The detailed accounts of the individual studies taking place in the community of practice, the second level generic analyses and the third level European conversations form the substance of Parts 2, 3 and 4 of the book.

Conclusion

The interpretive approach had its origins in the experience of developing a methodology for researching the religious lives of children. Ideas from ethnography were applied to questions of learning and teaching, and books for children and teachers were published applying the method. The key concepts of the interpretive approach were then utilised in various research contexts – including studies of children's dialogue in primary schools and a classroom study of student motivation (Jackson 2004, chapters 6 and 7). The approach was then adopted as the theoretical stimulus for the EC-funded REDCo project, and also for the Warwick REDCo Community of Practice, which has produced a series of action research studies related to religious education.[9] The next chapter, by Kevin O'Grady, shows how action research was adopted as a related theoretical and methodological resource for the Warwick REDCo Community of Practice, on the basis of the previous studies of secondary school students' motivation in religious education (O'Grady 2003, 2005, 2007a, 2008).

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9   There is scope for developing the approach further and for using its key ideas creatively, for example in giving attention to the ways in which the study of religion(s) might contribute to or complement related fields that focus on questions of personal or social value. These fields include intercultural education (Jackson & McKenna 2005), citizenship education (Jackson 2003, 2007), peace education (Jackson & Fujiwara 2008) and the application of principles from human rights codes to issues concerning religion, belief and education (Jackson 2007).

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