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# A *meta* approach to texts in religious education: researching teachers' engagement with sacred text scholarship in English secondary schools

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## ABSTRACT

This article reports findings from a sacred text scholarship project in Religious Education/Religion and Worldviews (RE/RW) lessons. In the *Texts and Teachers* project secondary school teachers found that RE became more *meta* through a more scholarly treatment of texts, and led to *leap moments* with pupils who could accomplish multidimensional engagement with texts. This article contributes to an improved understanding of how classroom textual hermeneutics addresses concerns with teaching sacred texts.

## KEYWORDS

Sacred texts; hermeneutics; teachers

## Introduction

Research on sacred texts in schools in examination related Religious Education/Religion and Worldviews (RE/RW) identifies certain prevailing cultures that frame the use of texts largely as propositional components to justify actions or beliefs as kinds of authoritative proofs for those actions or beliefs. Whilst all curricula are necessary reductions, this culture is limiting and causes concern among educationalists (e.g. Bowie 2020a; Bowie and Coles 2018). It reduces text to playing a kind of positivist function of a quasi-science. While undoubtedly present in some aspects of religion this hardly reflects the rich ways in which texts are engaged by religious communities in their differing ways and contexts. It implies texts are causes, but does not capture that in many traditions, texts are responses. The English secondary school culture centres on the propositional use of proof text binary questions in examinations with an associated positional combative experience reducing texts to debate props explicitly linked to preordained themes and often propositional beliefs, emphasising literal and fundamentalist forms of meaning. The result impacts the framing of religion and the practices of argumentation and critical analysis (Strahn 2010; Aldridge 2015, 2018; Cooling, Green, Morris and Revell 2016; Bowie and Coles 2018; Bowie 2017, Bowie 2020a, Bowie 2020b), fuelling essentialised accounts of religion and belief in the curriculum (Panjwani and Revell 2018). It eschews knowledge of sacred text scholarship, what some would call becoming a *model* or *good reader* (Eco 1979) and symbolic and metaphorical accounts of meaning, and arguably colonises the focus texts with imported concepts (Bowie 2020b; Hannam 2019; Lewin 2017). This positioning of sacred texts in examinations (in the English system at least) justifies an attempt to change the ways texts might be engaged.

To introduce some multidimensional (*meta*) thinking from hermeneutics and sacred text scholarship into curricula raises an immediate challenge in the form of Hans-Georg Gadamer's objection to any universal method, which came from his own rejection of any quasi-scientific process (Gadamer

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2012). Yet the hermeneutics of the twentieth century have played a key role influencing, for example, Biblical and theological interpretation (Thiselton 1992; Fowl 2008). The messy incongruency between philosophical hermeneutics and what this project calls sacred text scholarship, was a necessary feature of this attempt to address the limitations of the current problems of text culture in English schools' Religious Education/Religion and Worldviews (RE/RW). Findings from the *Texts and Teachers* project give some understanding of the potential sacred text teaching might offer the subject and contributes to an improved understanding of how classroom sacred text scholarship could be experienced by teachers (Bowie 2020a). This article focuses on select areas of findings, deductively determined and drawn from the data corpus as a whole.

In this work, hermeneutics refers to the art, theories and practices of interpretation, sacred text scholarship refers to religious (in this case Biblical or Muslim) sacred text works of interpretation, and sacred text education refers to pedagogic practices of teaching sacred texts. Philosophical hermeneutics is a broad field relating to much more than sacred texts, and hermeneutics engages art, music and many other subject fields and disciplines. The terms researcher and teacher participant are used but these roles are blurred as teachers led the application of principles into their curricula and contributed to discussions with university-based researchers during the project.

The English RE/RW external examination qualification taken in the English school year 11 or 10 (16 or sometimes 15 years old) called Religious Studies (RS) GCSE can impact the whole secondary curricula of schools due to the performance pressure on schools, through *spiralised* curricula. Recently these have been formally discouraged by the school inspectorate for reasons identified in research associated with this project (Ofsted 2021). It is not simply a matter of the approach to texts required in examination classes, but what that approach is doing to learning about texts and religion in RE as a whole (Bowie 2021).

Engaging texts in the classroom poses difficulties long acknowledged. For example, Aldridge (2015) discussed 1960s studies that showed difficulties with teaching the Bible due to misplaced assumptions about pupil cultural heritage. Pupils could not make the presumed connections to understandings intended by teachers. Hannam and Biesta have critiqued 'hermeneuticism' in recent debates around RE/RW. They follow the insights of philosophers such as Heidegger, Sartre and Levinas who suggest, in different ways, that sense making is not the main way human beings engage with the world, that humans are in a sense anti-hermeneutic. They argue education may be more revelatory than hermeneutical. Such theoretical challenges may hinder a general theory of a hermeneutical subject (for detailed exploration see Aldridge 2015) but the treatment of texts is nevertheless a concern that merits attention and attempts at improvement.

## The project

The *Texts and Teachers* project (Bowie, Panjwani, and Clemmey 2020; Bowie (Ed.) 2020, approved by Canterbury Christ Church University Research Ethics Committee Ref: 18/Edu/01C) set out to see what happened when teachers introduced scholarly techniques from Biblical and philosophical hermeneutics, and scholarly debate around Muslim text translation, into secondary age RE/RW education (11–18 year olds). It was inspired by Thiselton's (1992) reported experience that his students changed the way they engaged sacred texts as a result of such study and this project wanted to see if changes might happen for classroom teachers. The project used a programme of development and a mixed face-to-face/virtual community of practice and participatory research elements. In England, external examination questions provide little space for matters of text interpretation and a culture of proof texting. This project sought to discover what could be learnt from teachers' experiences of incorporating more scholarly engagement with texts into their teaching. What is their perception of classroom changes in lesson planning, when language of hermeneutics is used, with specific terms and concepts from sacred text scholarship, and a redesign of activities? Might this address shortcomings

of sacred text engagement in curricula while continuing to meet required objectives? The project's broader aim was to contribute to the development of a better '*sacred text education*' in Christian and Muslim traditions.

The project involved ten teachers in seven contrasting secondary schools with different pupil populations (names used here and elsewhere have been changed to protect anonymity). An open call was made through social media and association networks for teachers to apply to be participants and all qualifying applicants were accepted. The respondents came from diverse school contexts. Secondary school pupil populations across the country may be characterised in different ways. The pupil population the teachers taught were diverse in terms of religion and worldview: the intensely multi-religious school (n.1); the mainly mono religious school (Christian or Catholic) (n.4); the mainly 'nons' school (a complex group, see Lee 2015) (n.2). The teachers were split between teachers in their first 2 years of teaching (n.4) and those of much greater experience (n.6). The standing of the subject in different schools varied as well with high status highly resourced subjects (n.4) and lower status low resource subjects (n.3); this impacted hours of teaching for the subject in a given week and size of department.

Participants were encouraged to contextualise the hermeneutical thinking to their local curricula adaptation rather than prescribing a specific sequence of taught sessions. This was to enable teachers themselves to gauge the next steps they could actually take in their diverse curriculum contexts. To be clear, it was not a trial or testing of a specific curricula based on training in that curricula. The project pursued a more radical aim of seeing what happened to teacher mindsets around the place of sacred text studies and hermeneutics using in-service professional development activities with teacher participants as a group forming a virtual community of practice, with supplementary face-to-face components. The program the teachers engaged (Bowie (Ed.) 2020) drew on basic semiotics, sacred text hermeneutics literature, contrasting sacred text commentaries and literature on the practice of sacred text education. It included the work and expertise of Margaret Carswell and Farid Panjwani, educationalists specialising in Christian and Muslim text traditions. Following prior curriculum critiques of how texts are *used* in the subject, the project built on the concept of text-engagement, inspired by Fowl's model (2008) for theological interpretation and Carswell's (2018) work on teaching texts, beyond exclusively using texts for argumentation. It drew on commentary and scholarship around matters of translation of the Qur'an. It sought to include linguistic and historical critical traditions, acknowledging the ongoing presence of literal dimensions of meaning in religion, broadly understood. From hermeneutics scholarship it included readerly traditions of hermeneutics, recognising the vantage point of communities in context and exploring the norms developed in reading sacred texts within traditions. It sought to place the pupil as both reader of 'reading communities of faith' and also as rereaders of text themselves, irrespective of worldview. It incorporated the idea of the polyphonic nature of texts, where layers of meanings interact within a text. It sought to introduce pupils to fundamental philosophical hermeneutical questions including the question of where meaning resides, death of the author (from Roland Barthes criticism that a reader's knowledge of the author should not be incorporated into the reader's interpretation of the text), settled understandings among a community of faith and the particular reader's consciousness.

The literature was multi-denominational and from multiple religious and non-religious worldview perspectives although not comprehensive of all traditions of sacred text reading or interpretation. The program (virtual community of practice and supplementary face-to-face sessions) was 18 hours long excluding time for personal reading. Participants designed and implemented changes within their contexts. The project hypothesised that relatively simple changes could lead to significant differences in teacher mindset and also in the classroom that the teachers themselves could recognise. These involved a change in the way they conceived and perceived the subject and the ways questions were asked about texts – from explaining what a text means to exploring different

meanings a text might bear, some of them simultaneously. Participants were visited at the end of the school year for a long on-site interview and in some cases there were follow up conversations remotely, after those interviews.

The data for this project is teacher talk in conversation with researchers from multiple points in the year including initial interview (approximately 30 minutes), virtual sessions with the teachers, a reading program and book group, and correspondence to support the implementation of changes. Final in-depth interviews (recorded and transcribed) with the participants (between 60 and 90 minutes) were conducted on school premises with the Headteacher's approval. These were analysed abductively (a combination of theoretical (deductive) and open (inductive) coding) to lead away from old insights and towards new theoretical insights. It both used themes identified in a prior seed corn teachers' focus group project (Bowie 2020a) and previous research (Bowie 2017, 2018; Bowie and Coles 2018) informed by the work of Cooling and Pett (2018) while continually asking, what does this statement say about the phenomena under investigation?

A project advisory group with diverse educators and experts from associated fields also contributed. This analysis is inflected by themes from associated research literature, researcher experience, the interpretations of the research team and participant teachers as a group, as well as the interviews from the individual participant teachers. It involves a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), framed to respond to broader questions that led to the project conception and also subsequent engagement around questions of the nature of the subject of RE. The analysis here draws on both empirical and theoretical sources and is more properly understood through a broad conception of research, framed through philosophical beliefs around the educational value of hermeneutics (see Bridges and Smith 2006, 132; Carr 1995, 1; McCormack et al. 2002, 95–6). The project was focused on gathering data from the teachers, rather than pupil perspectives, or alternative measurements of pupil learning, and therefore relies on teacher perceptions of change and benefit. Teachers make crucial judgements of their pupils and so it was deemed appropriate for this study, but is a limitation. Other studies could seek to quantify and qualify learning change through more pupil focused methods. The study has a small number of participants with the inevitable limitation that entails, although many hours of transcripts exist from meetings throughout the year for each participant.

## Discussion

### *Can sacred text study bridge more than one worldview?*

If sacred text study is to be seen as more than an internal faith development activity, the possibility of operating across more than one sacred text tradition matters. This would show whether a hermeneutical progression frame might be one of the gifts sacred text education can give the subject. A hypothesis behind the project was that such a frame could contribute to building a core of disciplinary knowledge. Sacred text scholarship emerges within religious traditions and varies across those traditions themselves. For example, Study Bibles of Jewish and Christian forms are far more common than anything present in the Muslim scholarly tradition although there have been developments in Muslim texts with the emergence of *The Study Quran* (Nasr 2015). Any such progression frame would need to recognise that while there may be similar issues of translation and contextual reading, practices of interpretation differ.

Four participants spoke directly about movement across religions or worldviews. One participant, Frances, had adapted the curriculum to include some focus on Christianity and some on Islam, bringing elements of hermeneutics to each area and also looking to develop progression paths between the religions. Frances, teaching in a co-educational community school/academy with what she characterized as predominantly non-religious pupils, moved from the Book of Genesis 'topic' to teaching Muhammad's final speech with a transfer and progression of hermeneutical practice

We're actually unpicking text and kind of looking at what's important in the text and what's being said and why and the context that they've learnt about when Muhammad was living, why that was important for him to say those things out loud in front of everyone, just before he died. [Frances]

Jen, teaching at the same school, also explored the ways her pupils 'naturally translated' the questions they had explored in Christianity to the study of Muhammad's final speech. She spoke about exploring examples of translation and audience with her pupils in Christianity and Islam and she said that talking about *audience* with pupils was new to her practice. Both Jen and Frances were relative beginners to the scholarship of sacred texts and hermeneutics at the time.

Jim, teaching in a Catholic school with a Catholic pupil population from very diverse cultural backgrounds, foresaw transferability between religions, through a hermeneutical link between Catholic Christianity and Judaism. In the teaching of Judaism, Jim saw broad traditions of commentary, interpretation and disagreement. It was clear that the language of hermeneutics and sacred text scholarship provided a grammar for the disciplinary scaffold in which the worldviews of Catholic Christianity and Judaism were situated though of course it would be necessary to ensure that Jewish sacred text scholarship was used in interpretations of the Hebrew texts to avoid a colonisation of Hebrew texts with exclusively Christian readings (Docherty 2018).

Frances and Jim taught in very different contexts. Both had had some encounter with hermeneutics in their prior study, and for both the project seemed to be an opportunity to draw on knowledge that had not previously featured in their classrooms. Jim taught in a large school department with a 10% curriculum timetable in which Catholic Christianity was the main focus of teaching and a faith-based education normative. Frances taught in a school with fewer resources and more religions to teach, without a religious character framing the ethos of the school. Yet both saw opportunities and possibilities in a greater attentiveness to the texts in their subjects which they in part enacted in the project.

There will be complexities around the study of multiple sacred texts given the diverse ways of reading texts and the different scholarly approaches practised around the world. Drawing on sacred text scholarship would not remove the risk of colonisation of one text tradition with the norms of another, but there is some interchange between different religions' sacred text scholarship and so it could at least be explicitly visible. The participant teachers experimented using the insights from philosophical hermeneutics and sacred text scholarship. As with other kinds of multi tradition sacred texts reading (Ford and Pecknold 2009), it seems worthy of further development work.

### **How teachers reported their engagement with sacred text education**

A critical issue for the project was to move beyond seeing texts exclusively as proofs for propositions and this required a different kind of analytical frame. None of the teachers professed confidence in hermeneutics or the scholarship of sacred texts at the outset. Teacher subject knowledge is a vital factor but could a relatively short-term provision of resources make much difference? The project found that teachers in multiple contexts readily accommodated frames of analysis from the sacred text scholarship literature for classroom use.

Frances had observed that her school's pupils commonly started secondary school with an understanding of a 'literal reading' of sacred texts. They were familiar with the Bible being a source of what is believed to have happened, a kind of alternative history, but they were unfamiliar with categories of meaning such as spiritual meaning, symbolic or moral meaning. They had encountered the text as a story of something that happened or was believed to have happened.

Frances made explicit an approach to text to her Year 7 students at the beginning of their secondary RE/RW that would specifically seek to open up a multidimensional kind of engagement. Rather than stating the different perspectives that different Christians held on interpreting the Flood narrative, she would instead say: 'Right, what did we learn at the beginning of term about text and about the Bible and about interpretation?' She found her students could answer questions of

interpretation themselves considering literal or symbolic meanings. She was able to begin to engage her students with the idea that *meaning* can have different components to it, not just that different people believe different things about a text.

Frances related this to the GCSE question type seeing it as providing a way of helping prepare her students to understand more about why differences exist within traditions as well as the development of some classroom tools that focused on hermeneutics. Interpretation was specifically discussed in classroom talk as a process with tools or features. It added dimensions of interpretation to a literalist reading, but the move was from a mode which simply stated some believers think 'x' and other believers think 'y', to different ways in which texts can be seen as having meanings.

The participant teachers grew in confidence as a group in this area. Jen (the newly qualified teacher at the same school as Frances) spoke about the application of aspects of the professional development to the curriculum and how she felt the children could now talk about different interpretations and use the language of literal, spiritual and symbolic with confidence.

Geoff, a newer teacher at a Catholic school with a mixed pupil population from different cultural and denominational backgrounds, introduced his pupils to the notions of the 'world' behind, within and in front of the text, a tool popular in theological interpretation highlighted by Pett and Cooling (2018). Geoff's students collated information into a diagram of these dimensions so they could see the different contextual information for each of these 'worlds' and how these formed layers of meaning. Geoff wanted students to develop a metaphoric understanding, along with some sense of historical critical dimensions of meaning:

So group 1, which looked at the miracle account of Jesus healing the leper, pupils made connections between Luke being a gentile and the impact it would have on its audience. When considering significance today some people highlighted how Christians should follow the example of the leper and seek out Christ. They saw the physical ailment as a metaphor for sin. This was without my prompting. [Geoff]

What Geoff identified here was identified in several of the participants' classroom experience. Once introduced by the teacher, pupils immediately made sense of the kinds of meaning that are possible, as if there was a latent capacity that simply needed a shape to be permitted to be expressed.

Jim spoke about the link between the senses of meaning and divine inspiration, in the context of a Catholic school (different from Geoff's) setting, balancing responsibilities to Catholic teaching and the development of pupils' faith, and a desire for an academic subject. He saw that this interpretative approach to the texts connected both dimensions:

At Key Stage 3 . . . we do Creation as one of the first topics that they do in first form. And they would have done multiple readings of Genesis and they would be accustomed to the idea. Again, within the Catholic tradition . . . we would talk about, I mean the term that you used which we are now beginning to use more, aetiology. We would talk about mythic narrative I think which was the Charpentier term. I think people are more uncomfortable with the term mythic narrative instead of religious context now so we try to avoid that language because if there's any sense, because we're trying to maintain the idea that there is some level of divine inspiration but there is also a text that needs to be analysed and can be understood in a historical religious context. [Jim]

Jim here is drawing on a popular hermeneutics work by Charpentier (1981a and b) which had been used in the project's program.

Teachers themselves had found they could integrate the new knowledge they had encountered into practices in the classroom and could see responses to those integrations. As with the seed corn project, GCSE remained a topic participants spoke about. Frances wanted to develop the curriculum to focus on fewer different things in more depth, and saw texts as a good focus at Key Stage 3 (11–14 year olds), in part because she thought it would help with the use of texts as sources in the GCSE examinations. Exploring the reasons for denominational differences was also seen by Frances as key to increasing student capacity to answer long evaluation questions in GCSE examinations. Jen also thought that this would improve GCSE answers

I think definitely with the whole results driven teacher side, I think definitely leading in and the stuff we've done with the GCSE lot will help them, and it will help them to get stronger, higher marks, if you want to say that, with the evaluation stuff. [Jen]

Pupils would be able to link justification of an evaluation to the interpretation. This was an advantage hypothesised by Professor Towey, a member of the advisory group, in which he had suggested that the approach to reading the texts was one of the distinctive areas of difference that illuminated diversity within the Christian tradition.

### *Engagements in the classroom*

Teachers felt they could quickly and adeptly accommodate and apply terms and structures from sacred text scholarship and integrate them into lessons with quite immediate results from pupils who also could quickly accommodate multiple dimensions of meaning. Many of the participant teachers (n.7) felt the engagement opened up ways of reading the text to students, irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds or worldview. Several participants spoke about a different kind of conversation taking place in their classrooms, not of an order previously encountered, which seemed to arise from teachers' use of language and frames that identified different dimensions of meaning. They spotlighted how examinations did not make much of this potential.

Jen saw that hermeneutics and sacred text scholarship in RE/RW had opened up a new dimension in the subject. 'So definitely it has opened that door which was closed before'. The richness of this left Frances (Jen's subject lead) frustrated that the specific areas related to hermeneutics were not part of the examination specification, even though they were required as sources of evidence for answers in the examination, but her sense that this added dimension was valuable shaped her planning for the future.

Becky, teaching at an independent girls' school, expressed concerns that this kind of hermeneutic turn was one that the GCSE simply did not reward:

I think it would lead into the GCSE. The problem we've got with the GCSE, there's text there but there isn't enough marks awarded to it, to be brutal for you to want to worry about it too much. There's so much other content that you need to get through and the way it's set. [Becky]

Geoff was frustrated that examinations seemed not to value sacred texts or the surrounding scholarship. Opportunities for developing deeper critical thinking skills were being missed. Jim identified gaps in the knowledge of sixth form students who had done the GCSE around symbolic meaning. Students who achieved high grades, were not required by the examination to have developed 'sophisticated understanding of the nature of symbols let alone symbols in text or the meaning of texts'.

Frances felt this focus on text would help with the use of certain readings of text in the building of extremist narratives:

Well then could you use the Bible to justify anything? And it's good for them to think about, "well could you? Could you, if you sat there and really wanted to, you could justify bombing the school and then doing whatever?" You could probably do it. [Frances]

Bill (a teacher in his first two years of teaching at the same school as Becky) was interested in philosophical hermeneutics questions including the idea of the death of the author, the significance of the reader and the limitations of hermeneutics. For him, this allowed for RE/RW to be more *meta*:

And one of the things one of the girls raised in one of the classes and they said 'but if I'm reading a text that, I'm a Christian, if I'm reading a text from a different religion it doesn't, I can't put myself in the shoes of that person'. [Bill]

Bill recalled how the pupil identified that the same words mean something deeper 'if you're a Christian . . . that is lost when you're not attached to that thing'. Bill's class explored the question of evaluation and how can we compare and evaluate one reading from another.



Jim found that some pupils responded very quickly to the idea that texts held different levels of meaning, that this was a straightforward idea that ought to inform the study of texts. He spoke of moments, framed as *leap moments*, with students where understanding develops and settles into a more complex account, recalling one 'important conversation' where a devout 16 year old Catholic student was shocked at the idea of symbolic meaning, having assumed a normative literal sense, unaware of the sense of meaning within Catholic Biblical interpretation. Jim clearly valued and thought important, educationally and also in terms of faith development, achieving an understanding that texts can mean real and significant things in different dimensional terms.

## Conclusion

Formal experiments in education are problematic as the influence of independent variables is routinely overwhelmed by powerful contextual factors (Thomas 2021). Nevertheless, a striking overall finding of this limited project was that the propositional culture of the use of texts could be complemented relatively straightforwardly by teachers reframing questions and deploying elementary frames that enabled texts to be positioned in more multidimensional ways. In so doing, as one participant described it, it added a *meta* dimension to the treatment of texts in RE/RW. While any attempt at suggesting a formal general method of interpretation would need to overcome Gadamer's objection (2012), and the dissonance between philosophical hermeneutics and different traditions of sacred text (e.g. Thiselton 1992, 2009; Fowl 2008), it is possible to draw from this scholarship resources to counter the prevailing culture. The common idea implied in the structures of GCSE assessments and therefore associated teaching is that a sacred text has 'a' meaning and that meaning relates to some propositional element of religion (located in a theme) at the expense of a broader conceptualisation of how religious people and traditions engage with texts and the ways of knowing practised around texts. An explicit focus on sacred text scholarship and hermeneutical questions of meaning in the curriculum has value in many aspects of RE/RW, not simply texts, but especially in terms of the multidimensionality of meaning that reaches into different aspects of religious lives.

Some participants found these approaches to texts helped with existing examination questions, helping their students explain differences within and between religions. Sacred text scholarship helped explain why differences were present within religion. Participant teachers saw a significant omission in examination design which does not particularly welcome sacred text scholarship, specifically in terms of encouraging multi layered analysis that was not simply in the service of winning a debate.

The findings of this qualitative study of ten teachers add to an emergent international field of hermeneutics and sacred text education with studies from Australia, continental Europe, the Americas as well as the UK. A group of teachers, working as a limited community of practice, applied hermeneutical frames to the teaching, focused on longer text extracts, and quickly found that this opened new kinds of conversations and engagements with pupils. This happened among diverse pupil populations and with relatively modest professional development. Sacred text teaching in RE/RW in all kinds of schools can have a multidimensional character. It confirms Kjørven's argument (2016) that it is possible to introduce pupils and teachers to what he describes as a process of dialogic reading, citing the text, wondering about the text and posing questions about the text that connects to current understanding.

Bodies of sacred text scholarship could assist in the development of a more disciplinary pedagogy (Georgiou and Wright 2020; Kueh 2017, 2020; Larkin et al. 2016; Pollefey 2020) and it is possible to imagine a teacher's professional identity integrating well with this scholarly company, including Biblical scholars or philosophical hermeneutics scholars, with some common ground and differences between them. Whether they approach this like Gadamer or Eco, or within a particular sacred texts discipline, like Thiselton or Charpentier, a more scholarly text focused classroom experience is

possible, providing opportunities for a deeper encounter with structures of meaning and the ways of knowing practised by traditions.

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