



# What is meant by 'RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING'?

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This is one of a series of articles in which a key term used in RE – in this case 'religious understanding' – is analysed, explored and explained.

### Introduction

This article sets out to explore what might be meant by the term 'religious understanding'. Although not often talked about, this term appears in a number of significant RE documents. Nowhere, however, do any of these documents explain clearly what it means and what it has to do with RE. The result is that there are many different ways of understanding the term, each with implications for RE.

Essentially, the question has to do with whether the 'understanding' is 'religious' because it has something to do with understanding religion or whether it is 'religious' because it is, essentially, a particular kind of understanding.

This article will take a brief look at some of the key ways in which the term has been understood and will begin to explore what 'religious understanding' might mean for religious education.

### The history of 'religious understanding'

Perhaps the best place to start is to look at how and where the term appears in RE documentation.

Published in 2004, *The Non-Statutory National Framework* for RE stated that one of its aims, in presenting a framework for teaching and learning in RE, was to promote religious understanding, discernment and respect, and challenge prejudice and

stereotyping (QCA 2004: 9). As with other references to this term, this document does not then go on to explain what it means by 'religious understanding', but the above statement suggests that it is something that can be achieved and therefore something to be promoted. In this sense, religious understanding might be understood as one of the goals of RE: something that students can aspire to as they engage with the religious worldviews they encounter in the RE classroom.

Three years later, in its inspection report, *Making Sense of Religion*, Ofsted described the best RE as one that 'equips pupils very well to consider issues of community cohesion, diversity and religious understanding' (Ofsted 2007: 5). Again, whilst it does not explain what it means by 'religious understanding', this description implies that religious understanding is not something to be attained but rather is an object of study in itself. It is part of the curriculum content of RE. In this sense, RE would not seek to promote students' own religious understanding but would offer 'religious understanding' as a thing to be understood; a thing to be scrutinised, examined and explored.

The term 'religious understanding' also appears in the aims of the DCSF-commissioned and funded project which set out 'to examine the materials available to schools for teaching and learning about and from world religions, to support community



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cohesion, and promote religious understanding amongst pupils' (Jackson et al 2010: 14, 32).

As part of this project, which was carried out by the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit, RE resources were surveyed to examine, amongst other things, 'how they promote religious understanding' (Jackson et al 2010: 33). Once again, this report does not define 'religious understanding'. Instead, it refers to an example from a primary school classroom where the teacher allowed 'her pupils' religious understanding and language to guide the lesson and serve as a foundation for the development of their thinking' (Jackson et al 2010: 32).

The content of the report and the way it outlines its findings suggest that the project team took the term 'religious understanding' to refer to pupils' understanding of religion: an understanding, however, which is in contrast to the inaccurate, superficial and inadequate understanding found in a number of RE resources (Jackson et al 2010: 6).



Interestingly, the term does not appear again in RE curriculum documentation until Charles Clarke's and Linda Woodhead's recent proposal for a new settlement for the relationship between religion and schools. This time it sits alongside 'understanding religions' as one component of an ideal form of religious education.

*Such religious education is critical, outward-looking, and dialogical. It recognises diversity, and encourages students to learn 'about' and 'from' religious and nonreligious worldviews. It involves both 'understanding religions' and 'religious understanding'. It develops knowledge about a range of beliefs and values, an ability to articulate and develop one's own values and commitments, and the capacity to debate and engage with others. (Clarke and Woodhead 2015: 34)*

While Clarke and Woodhead do not explain how they understand the term, they do include a reference to Edwin Cox's article 'Understanding religion and religious understanding' (Cox 1983) in which he argues that understanding religion and religious understanding are distinct activities, and that the latter has more to do with a personal faith commitment.

What does all this mean, and why is it important? To begin with, it means that when people in the RE community talk about 'religious understanding', they may be talking about a number of things.

### Key debates

This is not a recent phenomenon. The term 'religious understanding' has been the subject of much debate and controversy over the years. There isn't room in this article to present the wide variety of ways in which this term is understood, but it is perhaps fair to say that most definitions would fit under one (or more) of the following headings.

#### 1 Religious understanding as believing

For some, religious understanding goes hand in hand with religious belief (eg Marples 1978; Gardner 1980). Such an interpretation implies that *full* understanding – that is, religious understanding – is possible only when one believes the claims being made (eg the miracles of Jesus). This kind of understanding is an insider's understanding. Only a Christian/Muslim/Hindu can ever *really* understand what it means to be a Christian/Muslim/Hindu. Religious understanding in this sense becomes something to be observed from the outside. It becomes part of the content of the RE curriculum. Students in the classroom, for instance, might be expected to learn about how religious faith (religious understanding) might affect the way a Christian/Muslim/Hindu would live his or her life.

#### 2 Religious understanding as an understanding of religion

For others, however, religious understanding does not presuppose religious belief (see, for example, Hand 2006). Instead, religious understanding is to do with understanding the 'grammar' of religion. From this perspective, it is entirely possible to understand the claim that is being made (eg God is omnipotent), without believing it to be true (Attfield 1978). This is a scholarly understanding of religion; an intellectual understanding of religious phenomena (Holley 1978). As such, it does not require one to be on the inside. One could be an outsider looking in – although, of course, it is also possible that an insider might engage in an intellectual study of his or her own faith. Some might say that this is what theology is.

#### 3 Religious understanding as a spectrum

However, some feel that to talk about insider and outsider understandings is to create an unhelpful polarisation that treats religious understanding as an all-or-nothing affair (Astley 1994). The problem with the

idea that it is only possible to fully understand religion from the perspective of an insider is that it raises questions about whether RE is a viable educational activity. If those on the outside cannot really understand, what is the point of RE?

In the same way, the difficulty with suggesting that an outsider can only hope to develop a cognitive, intellectual understanding of the religion being studied is that such an understanding feels lacking and a bit 'cold', devoid of any kind of empathy. Some might say that such an understanding could never really hope to grasp why, for some people, God or 'the transcendent', is the 'ultimate ground of their being'; the axis upon which their whole world turns. Such an understanding could not begin to comprehend the reasonableness (or even desirability) of such a position.

These issues with the notion of insider–outsider understanding have led some to suggest that it might be more helpful to think about religious understanding as a spectrum where the outsider's intellectual understanding of religion and the insider's faith commitment are really just two ends of a continuum (Grimmitt 1987; Astley 1994). Both types of understanding may be seen as 'religious understanding'. The difference between them is simply one of degree: one is at one end of the spectrum of 'religious understanding' and the other is at the other end.

Their places on this continuum, however, are not static. Neither is 'better' than the other. And it's certainly possible that an individual may have elements of both. It is entirely feasible that someone brought up in a faith tradition might adhere to some aspects of that tradition more closely than to others. At times, they might even find that they are closer to an outsider's point of view than that of a fellow insider. >



### Moving on

Perhaps there is yet another way of looking at this: by not thinking about what religious understanding might mean per se, but what it might mean in the context of RE. The question might then become: 'Is there a particular kind of religious understanding that belongs to RE, in much the same way that scientific understanding might be said to belong to science education?' Not 'belong' in an exclusive way but 'belong' in the sense that in science education students are shown how to think scientifically. Perhaps in RE, students should, or could, be shown how to think religiously – not necessarily in the sense of having a religious perspective on life (as in a faith commitment), but in the sense of understanding religion, even as an outsider, from the point of view (as far as is possible) of an insider.

For some, this kind of understanding might be seen as a theological understanding. It's about having an understanding of religion that goes beyond what has been described by Ofsted (2013) as a superficial, simplistic, scant, insufficient, distorted, fragmented, low-level, weak understanding of religion and moves into a deeper understanding – an understanding of the 'transformational nature of religion ... the ongoing power of religion for effecting change in people's lives' rather than just simple knowledge of the 'external manifestations' of religion (Jackson et al 2010: 100). Seen in this way, religious understanding is about understanding the religious importance of something.

### Religious understanding and the RE teacher

So far, we have looked at the different ways that 'religious understanding' has been understood over the past few decades by philosophers, educators, theologians and so on. What is clear is that each way of understanding 'religious understanding' has significant implications for RE.

If religious understanding is seen as *true* understanding, which is only possible for the insider, and if an outsider can never hope to fully understand the religious beliefs and practices being studied, then what is the point of an RE that has 'religious understanding' as one of its goals? However, if 'religious understanding' is a spectrum,

a continuum, with insider understanding and outsider understanding simply at different ends, then RE is a viable and desirable activity. Finally, if religious understanding is actually a particular type of understanding specific to RE, then RE must make sure that it provides opportunities for students to develop that kind of understanding.

This last point is perhaps best exemplified in the DCSF-funded project report *Materials used to teach about world religions in schools in England*, which argues that 'RE teachers (and producers of RE resources) must ensure that pupils learn about the spirituality and/or theology of religions' (Jackson et al 2010: 12).

The report talks about the need for a *deep* understanding of religion, and of what being a follower and member of a religion entails: an understanding of Sikhism, for example, that goes beyond recognition of aspects of Sikh identity (eg the five Ks) to consider how Sikhism's worldview and guiding ethics, which evolved and were expressed in a distinct socio-historical context, influence the thoughts and actions of Sikhs in new contexts today. Such an understanding would see that, for Sikhs, the Gurus were not merely preachers or philosophers who had an idea and simply shared it, but were divinely sent to bring light to human understanding on life's purposes and how to live it (Jackson et al 2010: 100).

### Conclusion

In this article I have outlined how and where the term 'religious understanding' appears in some significant RE documentation; explored various ways in which the term 'religious understanding' has been, and might be, understood; and proposed that if religious understanding is to be a legitimate aim for RE, one that is attainable by all students, then it might best be understood as a particular type of understanding of religion – one that is different from a sociological, philosophical, anthropological understanding, for instance, and one that, at the very least, would reflect a more theological understanding: one that gets to the heart of the religious significance of what's being studied in RE. ■

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