Failures of Meaning in Religious Education
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Introduction

Arguably anxiety is one, if not the, defining characteristic of late industrial societies; it insinuates itself into the interstitial spaces of common and personal life and is manifest in a scepticism that a range of social practices and institutions can provide epistemologically, ethically and ontologically adequate resources for our day-to-day living. Philosophers and social theorists have increasingly replaced the 'search for truth' with the 'search for meaning' – a quest that has come to shape our discourse about the purposes of religious education in not only common schools but also in religiously denominated schools. If students are no longer required to attend to the truth claims of religion they should certainly attend to the meaning these claims have for their adherents. Moreover they should draw on the insights of religious belief systems to inform their own 'meaning-making' (learning from religion). The displacement of a more traditional, epistemologically-loaded, study of religion by such personal 'meaning-making' was intended to enhance the relevance of the subject and its efficacy as a resource for living with oneself and with the other. It is, we would suggest, not unreasonable to ask whether or not the pre-eminent place afforded meaning in religious education has conduced to the realization of such enhanced efficacy. This essay offers one attempt to investigate how such questions of meaning are treated in the day-to-day transactions between religious educators and students in and beyond the classroom.

In 2007 the Arts and Humanities Research Council and Economic and Social Research Council in the UK launched their joint programme on 'Religion and Society' and the study which informs this essay was funded by this programme. The project had the elegantly simple title, 'Does

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Religious Education Work?' and the centrepiece was an ethnographic study in 24 schools (common and religiously denominated) across the UK of the practices that surround and inhere in religious education. In addition to our multimodal ethnography (Walford 2008) we conducted professional seminars using the Delphi method (Baumfield et al 2011), text book analyses, policy analyses, participant research, and an on-line questionnaire was made available to pupils in all of the participating schools.. As far as possible we allowed the ethnographic data to speak for itself and used an'emergent themes' process to foreground our questions and interrogations. One of those emergent themes was 'meaning making'. In other words, we did not begin with the question, 'what does x mean?' but with the data itself. Hence we do not, at the beginning, offer a substantive account of meaning in religious education but have chosen to defer that discussion to the end. In that way we hope to free up the material from being overly determined. How pupils experience RE as depicted in the case studies offers some uncomfortable insights into their perceptions of the nature of the subject, particularly in the context of preparing for public examinations. We have selected particular instances[1] where the pupils themselves have highlighted discrepancies between the aims and the enactment of RE in the classroom for particular attention. In doing so, we make no claim to uniformity or universality of experience but would suggest that they raise highlight important tropes in the experiences and practices of the subject in secondary schools. The extent to which our concerns represent a fundamental fracture in the fabric of RE in our schools can be tested cumulatively through the replication of the methods we have used in the project and to this end, we will be making our ethnographically rich data sets available online.

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[1] It would have been possible to substitute many other examples for those highlighted here. The examples here were so chosen because they exemplified very particular kinds of failures of meaning.

In what follows we attempt to contextualise religious education in the UK in current discussions of efficacy, as manifest in inspectoral reports and allied scholarship, illustrate how complex are the entailments and purposes of religious education, explore some of the ethnographic and related data to understand something of how meaning is transacted in the lived experience of the classroom and, finally, attempt to locate that material in more general observations about the nature of meaning in religious education.

The Context and the Purposes of Religious Education

With its explicit mention some 11 times, the most recent Ofsted subject report, _Transforming RE_ (Ofsted, 2010), foregrounds 'meaning' as a central, perhaps _the_ central, feature of religious education. Such a concern is not evident in cognate subjects such as history, which mentions it not once (Ofsted 2011)[2]. Even the recent OfSTED (2012) report on the teaching of English, _Moving English Forward,_ features only 7 mentions of meaning, of which only one is actually concerned with the meaning of language. The majority are focused on activities that are 'meaningful' for the students. Hence meaning here becomes a synonym for 'relevance' and may not be considered primarily as concerned with the meaning of the object of study in and for itself.

Given the centrality that meaning appears to play in the espoused purposes of RE, it is important to understand the nature and extent of its instantiation in the practices of religious education in the schools that form the locations for this study. Somewhat ironically, in _Transforming Religious Education_ success at Key Stage 4 was considered not with respect to its efficacy in unfolding meaning but in the 'increase in the number of students leaving with an accredited qualification'. In light of the many other observations about

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[2] The history report, 'History for All' uses 'meaningful' twice but, like the English report this is in connection with making the activities meaningful for the students as an educational exercise.

weaknesses in teaching the increase in uptake does not self-evidently appear to be the consequence of improved quality, nor indeed to have led to a concomitant increase in resources (material or time allocation). Such concerns as are raised in the Ofsted Report are echoed in Jackson's et al (2010) analysis of materials used in the teaching of religious education. The Report points out that there was a widespread perception [amongst academic consultants] that 'many of the resources fell short in conveying a real sense of the deeper significance and power of religions in the lives of the believer…' (ibid p.6). This concern with the deeper significance and power of religion is of course another way of pointing to the centrality of meaning in religious education.

A protracted series of additional comments in the Ofsted Report, with some 24 discussions of specific weaknesses, suggests that the provision of high quality religious education is in a parlous state across a substantial range of entailments, including specifically religious content, intellectual challenge, assessment, limited access to subject specialists and timetabling difficulties. It might be suggested that these weaknesses are contingent, reflecting little more than that RE is often taught by inadequately prepared, and not infrequently non-specialist teachers, and under-led and resourced by senior managers in schools. Indeed our own research report exposes some such contingent weaknesses in many of the schools we studied (Conroy et al 2011). However, this cannot be the sole explanation for such systemic weakness given that, during our ethnographic work, we found varied and complex failures of meaning despite the schools self-identifying as having confidence in their provison for religious education. Rather, we would suggest, everyday RE is striated with failures of meaning that emanate from foundational or constitutive confusions in the conduct of the subject that are deep seated. These constitutive failures, we propose, emerge out of epistemic and values confusions about the very purposes and meaning of religious education in a late industrial society.

While the purposes of RE are multiple and complex, at its core two competing impulses rub awkwardly against each other – the epistemological impulse to understand the nature of the thing-in-itself and the ethical impulse to appropriate the study of religion as a means to cultivate certain moral dispositions and attitudes (Grimmitt 1987). This conflation potentially gives rise to a crisis of meaning in so far as the first impulse must perforce rest on a position of substantive epistemic neutrality whilst the second must abjure, to a greater or lesser extent, such neutrality. This epistemic and ethical conflict in turn gives rise to a conflict with regard to the meanings of the activities themselves. Hence the anxieties (expressed in the Ofsted and other reports) concerning the efficacy of religious education may equally be themselves anxieties about meaning.

Let us expand on this a little. *From our analysis of the claims and practices of religious education and arguably as a consequence of maintaining many of the structural features of religious education, which were created in the nineteenth century,* into the twenty-first century has been that policy makers and professionals alike are unclear about the specifically educational purposes of religious education (Baumfield et al 2011). They do not wish to 'give up' religious education for significant political and cultural reasons, but have consequently burdened it with a great many competing imperatives. These include, but are not exhausted by, substantial contributions to the following educational entailments[3], many of which have overlapping elements but some, at least prima facie, are conflicting:

    a. Religious literacy (knowledge and understanding religious ideas and language and their social and cultural impact

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[3] This list derives from the findings of (1) a two-day Delphi seminar for professionals from a range of interest groups in the field, (2) reports from teachers involved in the project, and (3) published policy and pedagogical materials. It is not intended to be exhaustive but representative.

b. Dealing with truth claims and pluralism
c. Philosophical understanding
d. Understanding heritage
e. Citizenship education
f. Multicultural sensitivity and awareness
g. Spiritual and social cohesion –contributing to school ethos
h. Nurturing pupils in particular communities (including catechesis)
i. Moral development
j. Spiritual life and religious observance
k. Enhancing local demographic considerations
l. Very particular 'Socratic dispositions'
m. Sex and relationships education

On top of this complex concatenation we must overlay yet further entailments such as examination success, personal development, the cultivation of creativity, the promotion of community cohesion and so forth. While we do not wish, at this stage, to further disaggregate these entailments, we would point out that they provide a formidable account of what it is intended that religious education will offer to students. Although we might not expect every student in every circumstance to consciously attend to these myriad features of religious education, we are nevertheless likely to desire that they are able to make sense of (understand and interpret) as well as ascribe meaning to those entailments that comprise religion as a whole. Consequently, if they understand only fragments, can they be said to be religiously educated? Moreover, can we ever say that we have a legitimate expectation that students acquire such a synoptic view if we are unclear as to whether or not the teacher has the same view? The answer to these questions must surely reside in the actual cases of students and teachers. In the next section we therefore wish to look at some such cases in order to understand a little more how meaning is or is not transacted in the everyday experience of the classroom. Having done so we

will use them to uncover and reflect on more general issues of meaning in the social practices of teaching religious education.

Fieldwork

Example 1. A lower 6th Interview in a London Comprehensive School

> **Interviewer**: …you were saying that the philosophy is quite different?
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> **Student**: Yes, I think it's very different actually. Because in RS it's more about this is what this religion thinks and this is what that religion thinks, compare this view, at best! Compare this and that, whereas with philosophy it's more of a coming to those ideas. Before you even get to these theological issues…
>
> **I: You're saying that a lot of them don't really know why they're Muslim. Do you think RS helps with that at all?**
>
> **S**: No.
>
> **I: No?**
>
> **S:** No. Because RS...RS isn't philosophy. RS is just saying this is the way things are. It can help in some ways to say this is what this faith believes, so when you find Islam, this is what Islam says. ... I think it's...the way RS is taught is, these are the rules. This is what people do, but Islamicly, the way I see it, the way Islam should be taught really is not about, these are the rules, it's these are the principles and this is how

you come to the rules. So it's...I think that's kind of the problem. People will say, ok I have to fast and pray five times a day and this that and the other but for me that's not where it should start. It should start before that. So...
Because whoever's teaching would have to be able to fully appreciate the, not the idea, but the style of thinking and stuff.

The observations from the student in this interview point to our first concern with meaning. Operating from within a particular religious tradition (Islam), the student considers the teaching of religious education to be flawed in so far as it is concerned with comparative descriptions of social phenomena and practices rather than with religion as a way of not only construing but being in the world. Moreover, this resonates with other student comments and ethnographic observations from students in schools with relatively large numbers of religiously affiliated students. Inadvertently the student touches on the well-trodden Wittgensteinian path of the incommensurability of religious outlooks, suggesting that there are questions around the full appreciation of 'the style of thinking...' We are not persuaded that incommensurability *simpliciter* is at issue here- after all people from quite different religious traditions can communicate their ideas reasonably well in a wide range of contexts. And, as Ricoeur points out while,

an event belonging to one stream of consciousness cannot be transferred as such into another stream of consciousness. Yet, nevertheless, something passes from me to you. … This something is not the experience as experienced, but its meaning. Here is the miracle. The experience as experienced, as lived,

remains private, but its sense, its meaning becomes public… (1976, 16)

But even if the communication failures are not straightforward, it is possible to see them embedded in the clash not between a set of religious claims, but between pedagogical purposes—a theme that emerges repeatedly in our ethnographic and policy studies. Following Ricouer we can see that it is not that students mis-understand or mis-represent to themselves what is being communicated, rather it is that they deem the morphological discussion of religion within the classroom as having little salience in their religious lives. As the respondent goes on to observe,

> Because they are second, third generation Bengalis... school is a completely different experience all together and the way they're taught...RS would probably have been the first time they would have seen it in that kind of context in that way. So it's almost like you get two opposite ends of the spectrum. Like you get the cultural stuff and then you get the...what they learn in school...I wouldn't say it's exactly what Islam is. It's different…I dunno...it's strange.

What may be at stake here is the way in which the purposes of religious education are enacted in the conversational space. The gap between student and teacher emanates from the different meanings ascribed not to the religious cogitationes but to the purpose of religious education. The student in this case considers that the purposes of teaching religion in his classroom appeared to be dominated by somewhat basic comparisons, which misrepresent the

'being-in-the-world' nature of religious attachment. In this case the student considers RE to have been shaped by somewhat prosaic morphological considerations to which she ascribes little meaning and which fail to connect with the meaning she invests in religious being. There is a gap between the classroom or school attribution of meaning to the activity of studying religion and that of the student – a gap summarised in a group discussion in a different school where one respondent observes that 'I think the stuff the school teaches us...I think we have to kind of accept it when we're in school because that's what comes up in exams' (student interview: Girls' Comprehensive School, London). Here we can begin to see quite clearly an important distinction between purpose and meaning – passing examinations is purposeful but not meaningful.

Let us now turn to the second example; a set of field notes from one of the ethnographers on the project.

Example 2. Field notes: North Eastern Church school

The consequences for the meaning of RE and religion itself of the, possibly excessive, priority afforded examinations was to be seen in quite a number of the schools in our study. As one of our ethnographers observed whilst waiting in the departmental office, ' the notice boards had a lot of information about targets and performance graphs for RE broken down into small units of analysis.' In one 'Year 10 top set' revision class being observed,

> '… there was persistent low level
> disruption…The … point at which the
> [students] did become engaged was when
> the teacher went through the results of the

mock exam and the predicted XXXXX Trust grades. Interestingly, even the most apparently disaffected pupils evidently cared about the grades and were quite competitive'.

The Department has a VLE on which can be found past papers with marks schemes for the questions – there are also tally counts of how often key-words/terms come up and pupils are encouraged to check this and make sure they have the definitions clear and learn them. The [particular] lesson [observed] focused on one question and mark scheme.

Question:
How might the presence of religion in the world demonstrate the existence of God?
Marks Scheme:
2 marks per bullet point
- Many different people believe in God
- Religions have a common focus and share some key ideas
- Prayers sometimes seem to be answered
- Believing in God helps people in their life

I found that the class were not really engaged in the lesson and overheard the ;
"I've written it so that I won't seem very clever."
"I don't believe in any of them – why do I have to pretend?"

Once again, albeit from a somewhat different perspective, the purpose of religious education is subject to scrutiny from its students. The activity of breaking down the information into examinations sized gobbits within the lesson appears to echo a significant functional purpose of the activity – the passing

of examinations. With substantial corroboration from other parts of the field notes, it would appear that, for this group of students, religious education appears to be both facile and futile.

Perhaps more importantly, the examination question itself indicates a further difficulty with meaning. Prima facie, it appears to provide a meaningful task but on closer inspection it is revealed as conceptually confused. The relationship between the verb 'to demonstrate' and the possible putative answers suggest a significant gap in the communication of the concept of demonstrable belief; and indeed what belief might mean for adherents. How, we might ask, can the existence of adherents of itself demonstrate the existence of God any more than the existence of children who believe in Santa Claus lead us to believe in the actual existence of Santa Claus? The issue at stake here is whether or not the question is itself meaningful. We would suggest that it is both logically and existentially meaningless and leads to more confusion than clarity about what constitutes an appropriate question in the domain of religion.
Let us now move to a third, overlapping, example — a focus group discussion with GCSE students.

Example 3. London Community School Focus Group

Interviewer: What are your impressions of RE lessons in your school?

- P1: I am not sure of the structure of the lessons; it just seems to be random work on people's feelings.
- P2: would be useful to have an overview at the start
- P3: like what is in the exam
- P2: What happened in the lessons wasn't in the mock exam

P4: The book (revision guide) was useful and the crammer sessions were OK because only the people serious about learning came to them. In school time the lessons are just people messing around.

P1: Don't want to always just work to the test though, I like things like the Truth Tube stuff. Could be a little less vague if we did a section at time, there's lots of bits.

P2: Need to make the aims clear right at the start of the lesson.

P5: It's helpful if we know what we are doing.

P1: But there's no specific answer, it's your own opinions so you can't be wrong.

P5: the arguments and clashes are good, good for discussion.

How do RE lessons compare with other lessons in school?

P1: … more relaxed… you feel that you can express your opinions

P3: RE's down to what people believe so it's relaxed

P1: But some people use the subject and its advantages against the teacher, it's annoying because they take advantage…

P6: It's about different beliefs but some people…won't learn because they think there is nothing to learn because it is just what I believe.

P2: … – it's not a good 'cool' subject and this affects how much you want to join in.

P1: RE is not taken seriously, even in mock exam we were messing about. Students were running a competition about how many times a phrase…

P3: …like 'Gordon Brown's tie'

P1: could be used in an answer.

The sense of boredom and scepticism underpinning this conversation points beyond itself to one of RE's central challenges– coherence as to purpose and meaning. Students

appeared to have absorbed the view that the purposes of RE are vague, possibly meaningless, and primarily serve as a forum for the expression of personal opinions. The meaning of religion as an object of study inheres in its being a site for opinion forming; the meaning of RE is the provision of a site for agonistic self-expression. Superficially this can appear like the cultivation of a kind of Socratic engagement. Such a move can be seductive, but, in the dialogues, Plato is not much given to the view that 'it's your own opinion so you can't be wrong'. Nevertheless, we repeatedly witnessed, from teachers and students, the articulation of strongly relativist accounts of religious and ethical value and the reification and consequent valorization of personal opinion as the core purpose of religious education. Ironically, the meaning of religion is apt to be lost in the perceived purpose of RE as the site for personal positioning and (though this is less evident in practice than might be assumed) personal meaning making.

In the interstices of these commentaries and recordings what emerges is a clash of purpose with purpose and purpose with meaning, summarised in the following extract from our Delphi expert discussion;

> A. I'm troubled by this, still religious education by and large does entail some moral commitment… This of course gets us on to some very tricky territory because religions enshrine different conceptions of justice and fairness…

> B: Going back to the non-statutory national framework, the description of Religious Education at Key Stage 3 was in another context a 'beliefs and issues' agenda…
>   …
> C: You're talking about ideas, but I'm talking about people…

While the discussion here may be somewhat more sophisticated than in the case of the students, similar conflicts of purpose emerge – that is, the clash between those purposes concerned with ideas as locked into the performative categories of curricular and examination frameworks and those concerned with nurturing certain perceived forms of human (personal) development and flourishing. It might be argued that similar conflicts of purpose are to be found in other curriculum subjects, but that merely serves to reinforce the more general educational challenge. More importantly, religious education is a different kind of social practice to, say, maths education. The two may share similarities to the extent that they are both concerned with disclosing features of the world to students. However, in the case of maths any ethical or indeed existential import is of a second order kind – for example, having a sophisticated grasp of number might offer a resource for understanding better how national income might be effectively redistributed to reduce certain social inequalities. In the case of religious education as a social practice, the ethical and existential are internal to the practice itself. More than that, the purpose of maths is understanding; to understand the formal operations of trigonometry does not require that we freight the exercise of learning how to do trigonometry with an expectation that it will ethically change us[4]. Alternatively, the purpose of religious education *is,* as our protagonists have variously intimated, the creation of meaning; neither understanding nor evaluation will do.

So many 'meanings': so little meaning

But what is it we intend to convey when we talk about meaning in such a context? — it is clear from the model

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[4] Even in those areas where evaluation appears intrinsic to the pedagogic intentions it is, with notable exceptions such as citizenship, which in any event, shares some crucial features with religious education that make it vulnerable to similar challenges.

agreed syllabus in England (despite subsequent developments), from the work of a wide number of scholars, from the teacher comments and practices—and indeed from the student reactions and conversations—that meaning in RE is dominated by recourse to the personal. Even where colleagues disagree about how to bring about the 'learning *from* religion', there seems little doubt that they wish to communicate that the meanings internal to religion should also, in various ways, be internal to the student. Of course few of the teachers in our study regarded the cultivation of such internal meanings as entirely individualistic. Rather teachers considered that they should be nurturing meaning in some of the following ways:

- Personal
- Inter-personal - inter subjective
- Transpersonal   - Transcendent other –openness to the claims of transcendent religious experience and claim (I and Thou)
- Institutional meanings - RE as an institutional social practice deemed to draw students together within a school community
- Meanings within socio-religious community (which differ from the educational institutions ascription of meaning)
- Meaning as intention – 'this is what I mean by x.'

Despite recourse to so many refractions of 'meaning' it would appear that much religious education continues to fail to secure, for students (and in many case teachers), either epistemic or ethical meaning. There is in fact no very strong sense in our ethnographic records that religious education offers (1) an insight into the meaning theological claims have for their adherents (2) a coherent ground upon which the individual creates her own meanings rooted in something more substantial than oddly conceived personal preferences or (3) a transcendent ground for ethical attachment and moral behaviour. If meaning is constitutive of religious education

properly conceived, as we have suggested at the outset, it would appear to be, that the kinds of failures and confusions of meaning we have discussed above would appear to radically compromise religious education as an intentional social practice.

What might we possibly mean by the term, 'failures of meaning'? To come to some understanding of what such a failure of meaning might denote we need to consider 'meaning' itself. This is no straightforward task since there is more than one answer to the question, 'what does X mean?' To delineate but a few senses of meaning we can see that it can refer to the import ascribed to particular linguistic utterances as in, 'what does Mary mean when she says she can't complete the task?' Or it can refer to the ethico-religious import of particular actions such as the meaning of zakat for an observant Muslim. Yet again, it can indicate the significance that I attach to my particular life. Or, as was the case in one school in our study (a religiously denominated school), an icon attached to the wall (see Fig 1) might signify that this is a Catholic school. Simultaneously, it may signify (to the believer) that the incarnation is God's redemptive act and so forth. Looked at another way, and juxtaposed as it was with a collection of examination focused targets and descriptions, it may merely serve to reinforce certain regulatory and examination norms. Or, it might suggest an interesting causal connection between veneration of the nativity and examination success.

Fig 1.
SEE Below

The point here is that meaning is a notoriously and simultaneously allusive and elusive term and that, when used with respect to particular educational entailments, loses none of its characteristic slipperiness. Hence, when we ask what education means, some will argue that the question is itself 'meaningless' (as indeed did some of our participants in the

Delphi seminar), by which they intend pointing out that there is no singular account of education that will satisfy all those who wish to employ the term. For example, the liberal educational tradition, represented by Richard Peters and his successors has tended to consider the meaning of education to be located in the claim that it points to certain liberal intellectual values; for Jacques Maritain (1943), its meaning is to be found in its being a preparation for the assumption of particular kinds of 'spiritual ' freedom; for Robert Owen, amongst many others, its meaning is secured in the twin aims of emancipation and material success aiming, as it did for him, to meld the imperatives of character formation and securing the interests of capital 'around the collaborative pursuit of material prosperity' (Davis and O'Hagan 2010, 83). And these but scratch the surface.

As we have seen in our ethnographic excurses modern education often conflates 'meaning' and 'purpose'. In some of the examples cited above it can be a challenge to disaggregate the inscription of a meaning from the purposes of a particular activity. Hence meaning is intrinsic to the very activity of RE. In the case of religious studies (the study of religion) the purpose may be one of enhancing understanding of the phenomena. One is not required to have a meaningful encounter with the beliefs under scrutiny; in religious education, one is (at least theoretically). Nowhere is this more evident than in the text books and syllabuses for public examinations, where any claim to meaning has been displaced by the drive to fulfill one of the purposes we outlined above- that of passing an examination. Working at Key Stage 4 teachers often found themselves caught between the competing imperatives of education and examination. Their desire to help students understand the complex and subtle nature of religious systems, beliefs and practices often conflicted with their fear that a lack of success in securing high pass rates would undermine an already fragile professional identity. Hence meaning surrenders to purpose with amazing facility. Indeed, we would argue, an important

consequence of the rise of performativity has been the displacement of meaning by purpose though arguably meaning itself, as we suggest at the outset, displaced 'truth'. The difficulty for religious education lies precisely in this displacement. When we encumber it up with myriad entailments, in the belief that this will somehow make religious education stronger and therefore more resistant to the predations of performativity, there are two significant consequences. The first is that we turn religious education into its own antithesis and the second is the dilution of the character of meaning. And, as we have seen above, the classroom becomes a site of non-meaning or, at least for the elision of meaning. So it is that RE finds itself caught between two silences where it can make no substantive claims in the face of a performative and sceptical culture on the one hand and the mythical silence of the incommunicable and irreducible self on the other.

This inability to speak meaningfully about religion in the classroom leads to the cultivation of language without exchange value where the words fail to signify anything that resonates in the life of the student, where confusions, contradictions and conflations abound. Following Baudrillard, we recognise that it is precisely the illusion of neo-individualism (1994, 106) with its atomistic approach to meaning (where students suggest that RE is the site par excellence for rendering public their unanchored opinions) which flattens the power of language and meaning, rendering void the space wherein imaginary networks and self-representations may be exchanged for meaning. This flattening leads to expunging controversy by eliding out what is disturbing and discordant (Conroy 2004, 180). But it is also 'entirely profane...above all, sad, like everything that exhausts meaning. Lastly, it's utterly boring' (Baudrillard and Noailles 2007, 10). This exasperated sigh, evoking the 'boring' echoes in many of the student responses in our study.

The Baudrillardian model of language, interpreted in the light of Conroy's (2009),work on liminality and

enstrangement, suggests there is a need for managed discomfort if religious education is to be emotionally transformative and restore its primary role as a site for meaning making. Religious language must escape the mundane, that 'circuit of "liberated" words, gratuitously useable, circulating as exchange value' (Baudrillard 1993, 203), resisting simplifications or totally alienated significations.

The constraints of the examination context coupled with an inattention attend to meaning is manifest in not only the spoken attitudes of teachers but in both the tasks and questions posed to students at this level and in the presented work of students. Two examples from different schools serve to illustrate this point. In the first (1), a set of GCSE examination questions, the theological meanings of forgiveness are displaced by its being aligned to the political considerations of war. Lest one be in any doubt as to relative importance of forgiveness the mark scheme gives the game away! How, we might wish to ask, is a student to grasp the enormous theological complexity of a concept like forgiveness when (a) all that is required is a simplistic definition and (b) it is merely there to serve a subordinate function in the socio-moral discussion of war? So it is that the examinations process itself serves to evacuate the endeavour of religious meaning. Further, the triumph of purpose over meaning is witnessed in the rubric that students should use the 'correct GCSE technique'. In the second example the reductio ad absurdum is witnessed in the facile summation of some kind of distinction, though it's not clear whether such a distinction is theological, social or philosophical, between Catholicism and Anglicanism. And it won't do to dismiss this as just the work of a poor student given that theses serve only as examples of a much wider pattern of 'meaning void' questions and answers.
Fig 2.

SEE BELOW

Fig 3.

SEE BELOW

The questionnaire, the structure of which emanated from emergent themes in the ethnography, offered further insights, most especially around students perceptions of how RE compared to other subjects in the curriculum. An emerging consensus would suggest that RE was indeed different from 'normal classes'. In some respects this difference can be construed as positive in so far as pupils felt that the lessons provided opportunities for greater engagement with social issues and they enjoyed a more open and approachable style of teaching. However, they also rate RE as less important than other subjects.   The picture from the quantitative data tends to position RE as a subject concerned with the sharing of opinions rather than the reaching of any significant conclusions and to that extent coheres with what is found in the case studies. The fact that most pupils do not ascribe any utilitarian worth to RE is a double edged sword in so far as they enjoy not feeling any pressure but neither do they see any need to 'press for meaning'. It also suggests that attempts to enhance the status of RE through making it an examination subject is, as we have seen in the case studies, unlikely to be successful.

In the varied cases cited in this essay we see the inattention to meaning and the service of purpose without meaning. But if RE is to distinguish itself from other educational entailments then it is surely on the grounds that it does indeed bring something different – religious experience[89]– to bear in the educational space. Of course religious experience makes steep demands – it invites the enquirer to enter a space which is at once neither the property of the atomised individual nor of the community as a structurally closed static phenomenon, a space which belongs to the Ultimate. In this context, the individual, student and teacher, ought to be brought face to face with the incompleteness of their condition, their enstranged self. In this way religious language, to remain meaningful to the users

of that language, opens up the borderslands of our imaginings and is 'neither restrictive nor penurious in this context: it is the fundamental rule of the symbolic' (Baudrillard 1993, 204).

Even as we asked the question, 'Does Religious Education work? we were faced immediately with a retreat from the complexity of meaning by recourse to what Pinker (2008 p.374) suggests is 'plausible deniablity'. During the Delphi seminar there were a number of attempts by colleagues to declare the question unanswerable because, in a move of sublime circularity, there were too many potential purposes and we would not know what 'working' meant in each case. Rather than succumb to plausible deniability is it not better to turn our attention away from all those purposes and ask, 'Does it work in cultivating and communicating meaning?' Repeatedly, questions of meaning were deferred and potentially interesting discussions were cut short so as to deliver on the purposes of religious education- to get through the syllabus. Too often we observed that by succumbing to the demands of the examination, the clock was run down with fatuous exercises and the question of meaning could not rear its disconsoling head. Often this was a result of succumbing to the weight of the examination system.

Conclusion

In this essay we have illustrated the ways in which RE teachers in a variety of contexts have been unable to foreground meaning in ways that might reflect its constitutive position within the subject. It is no part of the argument here that such attention to meaning invariably has to affirm the claims of religious communities. Nor do our finding suggest that there is some singular account of meaning to be valorized. Indeed as Tomlinson and Engelke (2006, 2) argue, failures of meaning-making allow approaches to meaning as a contested and uncertain process, rather than an entity waiting to be uncovered. This contested conception of meaning allows

for the consideration of cultural artefacts, images and events that follow, not as the bars of a rigid cultural cage within which students and teachers are caught, but as the strands from which students and teachers weave a tapestry or tapestries of meaning. The hollowing out of religion and religious education in late industrial societies itself offers precisely such opportunities. As Bornstein (2006; 91) suggests, moments of meaninglessness for participants may themselves be both pedagogically and ethnographically meaningful. But this can only happen where the teacher has the capacity to recognise the significance of such moments of meaninglessness and respond to them.

On occasion, as with some schools in the study operating in areas of overwhelming secularism, indifference and hostility to religion, the tapestry can be almost blank, offering no points of reference from which to begin an exploration of the processes of meaning making within a given religious culture. In the end the enterprise of cultivating meaning is likely to fail so long as religious education both theoretically, and as a practice, continues to foreground purposes that must perforce offer too many contradictions as between the intellectual and the affective, the public and the private, the metaphorical and the literal, self-determination and civic cohesion and so forth. The displacement of meaning by purpose leaves religious education bereft of its single distinguishing feature − that meaning inheres in its very definition.

Central to the project design, and to our deliberations on the findings has been the interdisciplinary nature of the research team. In our reflections on the data and consequent analysis we had to face the possibility that our analysis might be considered no more than a lament for the loss of, or failure to realise, some putative golden age of RE. In our defence two small observations can be made. First, the move from aspiration to enactment is one of the key areas for analysis in the original project design and secondly, the 'lament' if this is indeed what it is, can be seen in the disappointment expressed

by the pupils as much as in the interpretation by the researchers.

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Fig 1.
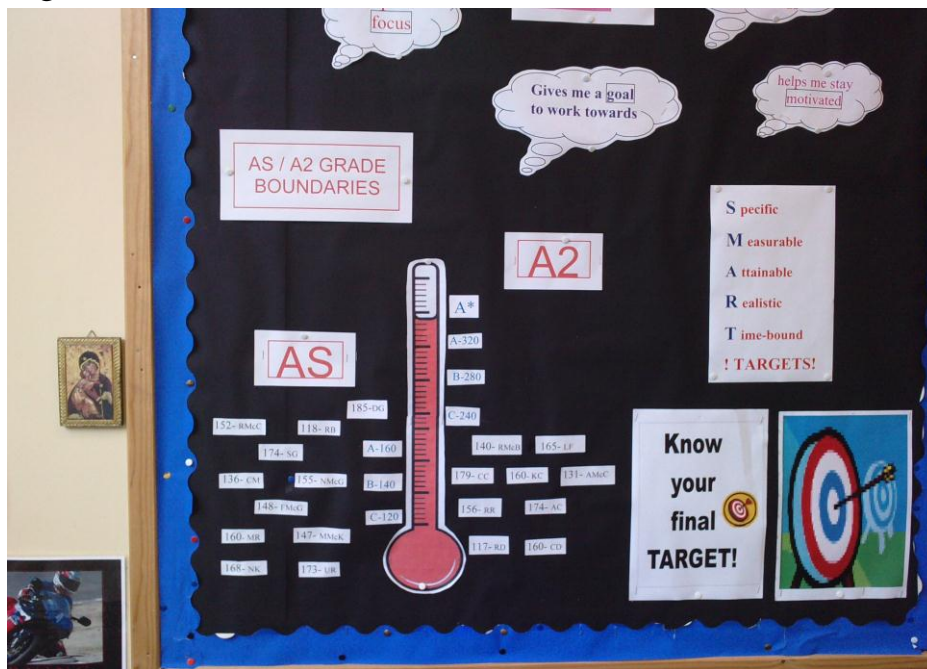
Fig 2

TEST FOR YEAR 10 LONG COURSE RS GCSE

Answer using the correct GCSE technique for answering the different kinds of questions: a), b), c) and d).   See coloured information sheet.

a). What is forgiveness?   (2 marks)

b) Choose ONE religious person, community or organisation working for world peace. Outline its work.   (6 marks)

c) Explain why nuclear weapons cause problems for religious believers   (8 marks)

d). 'All religious people should support their country's armed forces.'

Do you agree? Give reasons for your opinion, showing you have considered another point of view. In your answer, you should refer to at least one religion.   (4 marks)

Fig 3.

DIFFERENT DOMINATIONS

Roman Catholic - Very Strict.
Church of England Liberal.