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Author(s): Robert Jackson

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Contextual Religious Education and the Interpretive Approach

Robert Jackson

Abstract

This article responds to Andrew Wright's critique of my views on the representation of religions. Using various literary devices – associating my work closely with that of others whose views are in some ways different from my own, referring very selectively to published texts and exaggerating, and sometimes misrepresenting, what I actually say – Wright presents my work as dualistic, nominalist and as not genuinely hermeneutical. Wright contrasts what he sees as my extreme idea of religions as 'constructions' with his own view of them as 'social facts'. My reply illustrates and responds to Wright's account of my work, clarifies my own position, and raises questions about Wright's views, especially in relation to those of Gavin Flood, whom he cites with favour. My conclusion includes the suggestion that, although our epistemological positions are different in some ways, they spawn pedagogies utilizing some common principles and values.

Keywords: interpretive approach, contextual approach, representation, construction, social fact, religion, religions, groups, tradition

Introduction

Andrew Wright offers a critique of an aspect of my work, namely my views on the representation of religions in religious education (Wright, 2008). I have to say that I do not recognise much of his portrait. It functions to distance the author from contextual approaches to religious education in general (portraying me as their defender) and what he sees as my views on the representation of religions in particular. By the use of various literary devices – associating my work closely with that of others whose views are in some ways different from my own, referring selectively to my published work and exaggerating, and sometimes plainly misrepresenting, what I actually say – Wright presents my work as dualistic, nominalist (at the far end of the nominalist-idealist spectrum), as strongly

constructivist (religions are not constructions, but ‘fragile constructions’ or ‘arbitrary constructions’) and as not genuinely hermeneutical. He claims, for example, that my position involves ‘the nominal reduction of discrete religious traditions to the atomistic level of the individual spiritual lives of adherents’ (Wright, 2008, p. **). Wright contrasts what he sees as my extreme idea of religions as ‘constructions’ with his own view of them as ‘social facts’.¹

Contextual religious education

In his introduction, Wright quotes from one of my editorials in the *British Journal of Religious Education* (Jackson, 2004a), stating that my comments reflect the emergence of a ‘contextual’ approach to religious education that focuses on the immediate life-worlds of children and seeks to help them negotiate their sense of personal identity. In identifying this approach, Wright presents some brief quotations from Heimbrock, Sheilke and Schreiner’s anthology of essays entitled *Towards Religious Competence: Diversity as a Challenge for Education in Europe* (Heimbrock, Sheilke and Schreiner, 2001). The quotations are unattributed and, in terms of the content of the book as a whole, highly selective.² In a volume that presents some very different kinds of papers from people who clearly do not share identical views on the nature and practice of religious education, Wright infers a movement called ‘contextual religious education’. He goes on to state that his article is a critique of *my defence* of contextual religious education. The impression is given that I belong to a school of thought which I set out to defend through my own work. This is not so. Although I belong to a research workshop called the European Network for Religious Education through Contextual Approaches (ENRECA), I do not sign up to the views of any particular movement or school of thought. ENRECA has members with some interestingly different views. I am very interested in context, both pedagogically and in representing others (especially in avoiding stereotyping), but my work is not presented as a ‘defence of contextual religious education’. Thus, Wright’s rhetorical technique involves manufacturing a school of thought, presenting me as its defender and then distancing himself from it.

Moreover, Wright’s initial quotation, which he puts forward as my criticism of the treatment of religions in the *Non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education*, is from remarks made about the concept of *cultures*, not religions. The use

of the quotation to illustrate my views on *religious* education is a misrepresentation. In the editorial in question, I *welcome* the draft National Framework (Jackson, 2004a, p. 221). Neither of my critical comments is about the representation of religions: one is about learning ('it is a pity that there has not been some deeper thinking about hermeneutical learning' (p. 220)), and the other (which Wright quotes) is about cultures, not religions (p. 220).

The representation of religions

Wright then turns to some of my writing about the representation of religions. He acknowledges that I do not propose the 'wholesale deconstruction of religious traditions', but that I hold that 'reference to particular religions as complex, organic, constantly changing and internally diverse entities can still be used as a useful heuristic tool through which to explore the life-worlds of religious adherents...'
(Wright, 2008, p. **). Wright is correct in my characterisation of religions, but wrong in suggesting that they serve *only* as heuristic tools to illuminate individual experience or that I reduce religious traditions 'to the atomistic level of the individual spiritual lives of adherents'.

On the first point, I *do* think that it is possible to give general descriptions of religions, and indeed have done so, but such descriptions should not be regarded as final or uncontested, in the same way that a biography, however well researched and written, is not a final or uncontested account. Because a biography is not comprehensive, and may contain interpretations which might be disputed, it does not follow that the work is empty of descriptive content or has no value as a historical source. The case of religious traditions is similar. In *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach*, I dealt specifically with the potential charge of reductionism, pointing out that my view of the internal diversity of religious traditions does not challenge the existence or importance of religious 'wholes' (Jackson, 1997, p. 126). I go on to illustrate this (Jackson, 1997, p. 127) by reference to my own overview of 'Hinduism' or the Hindu tradition as given in *Approaches to Hinduism* (Jackson & Killingley, 1988, pp. 11-20; see also Jackson & Nesbitt, 1993, pp. 2-4). I will summarise the points made in my overview in order to drive home the fact that it contains a good deal of descriptive content.³

In attempting the overview, I drew on a range of disciplines and various scholarly studies (including regional and local studies), developing the image of the banyan tree as a metaphor for the Hindu tradition. The multiple roots of the tree have been struck in many different soils throughout the Indian subcontinent. The tree trunk includes important concepts (*dharma*, *karma*, *kāma*, *artha*, *moksha*, *samsāra* etc), social structures (the institution of caste), and practices and beliefs (daily and seasonal rituals, the *samskāras* [life cycle rites], worship [eg *pūjā* and *bhajan*] and festivals as well as meritorious acts, such as ‘fasting’ [*vrata*] and pilgrimages). I note that, although Hindus are restricted in the realm of conduct, they are relatively free in the domain of belief. However, I point out ‘tendencies’ in belief, such as the notion of *brahman*, the impersonal Absolute that pervades the universe, noting that the fact that *brahman* is considered immanent as well as transcendent leads to a pantheistic tendency in Hinduism. Equally there is a tendency to personalise the divine, as *bhagavān*, for example, so there is also a strong monotheistic current in the tradition. It is not contradictory for a person to affirm ‘God is one’ (*bhagvān ek hai*) while making offerings to several deities. There is also the notion of *ishta-devatā*, or ‘chosen deity’, worshipped by a person as the supreme God, while not denying the reality of other gods. The main branches of the tree are the three main theistic strands of the tradition, Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shāktism, while the many minor branches and twigs are the diverse beliefs and practices found in village India, where much attention is given to village deities (*grāma-devatās*), who, while lacking the great power of the devas, can affect individuals’ welfare positively or negatively.

The point of the metaphor and the overview is neither to present the *essence* of Hinduism nor *solely* to provide an interpretive tool. The overview is presented as a provisional ‘way in’, a preliminary to gaining a deeper understanding. It is not simply a heuristic tool; it conveys a good deal of information, but it is information that needs qualification and exemplification. This is what the main body of the book does. Ten themes are taken and illustrated by examples of individuals, in the context of groups of various kinds, portrayed through ethnographic studies, biographies or autobiographies. The individual studies are examined in relation to the overview in a fully hermeneutical way, revealing both its usefulness and its limitations, and bringing a diverse tradition to life through a range of examples from life.

I also discuss whether the term ‘Hinduism’ is a useful term or whether it would be better simply to drop it (as Wilfred Cantwell Smith suggests [Smith, 1978]), whether the tree metaphor is appropriate at all or whether Indian tradition is perhaps better pictured as a collection of different plants. I opt for keeping the terms ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Hindu tradition’, but using them critically, with plenty of qualifications – presenting the tradition as a diversity linked by family resemblances and shared traits. Thus, what I am presenting is a ‘construction’, but not one empty of descriptive content. The view of learning promoted in the book (as in the Warwick RE Project texts for students [listed in Jackson, 1997, for example]) is hermeneutical. The provisional ‘whole’ gives some preliminary understanding, while the illustrative examples show the inadequacies of the ‘whole’ as an account of ‘essential’ beliefs, values and practices, yet modify and deepen the general understanding of tradition. It is the continuing review of new examples from the tradition – of individuals interacting and communicating with others – in relation to the overview that brings learners into the debate, deepens understanding, and shows there is always more to learn or debate.

The importance of groups

On the second point – the accusation of reducing religious traditions ‘to the atomistic level of the individual spiritual lives of adherents’ (Wright, 2008, p. **) – my points above partly respond to this, but so does what I have to say about groups. Wright ignores my advocacy of ‘more personal accounts which link individual experience *to social experience*’ (Jackson, 1997, p. 69, my italics). He conveniently sidesteps what I have to say about ‘membership groups’, a notion he dismisses since I also discuss the influence of power on the representation of groups and traditions. Wright says:

Though membership groups constitute significant features of religious traditions, the fact that they are driven by the exercise of power has a profoundly destabilising effect on our attempts to describe religious identity. Ultimately, we have no access to the religions themselves, only to flawed representations constructed by groups and individuals with particular interests to defend. (Wright, 2008, p. **)

Here is another example of Wright’s rhetorical technique. I mention power as *a factor* in group relations. Wright exaggerates this to imply that I say that groups *are driven*

by the exercise of power. This is taken as a reason to disregard completely what I have to say about groups (I will discuss the issue of power later). Wright thus distorts my discussion of both traditions and membership groups, and ignores the research on groups supporting it (summarised in Jackson, 1997, pp. 97-104). It is clear from what I say in *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach*, and the body of ethnographic research that underpins it, that groups are of different, sometimes overlapping, types (sub-traditions, ‘streams’, denominations, ethnic groups, sects and movements, castes, families, peer groups etc [Jackson, 1997, pp. 64-5]). They are not simply ‘individuals within their local contexts’ as Wright claims (2008, p.**). Moreover – and this is the crucial point – groups are *communicative*. It is at the group level that social and linguistic interaction occurs, and that tradition is communicated. The ethnographic data from Warwick research projects relate to religion as a *social* activity. Groups provide the context for the processes of ‘transmission’, ‘nurture’ and ‘socialisation’ we were investigating.

In terms of Hindu tradition, for example, the processes of religious learning are *interactive* and take place in social contexts (Jackson & Nesbitt, 1993). Within the family, children learn mother tongue and family roles, participate in domestic worship, practise *vrats* (fasts associated with vows) and other rituals, celebrate festivals, absorb traditions regarding food, watch films and videos with religious themes, listen to stories etc. In wider social situations, children participate in language and religion classes, temple worship, festivals (including singing, dancing and instrumental music) and other public rituals and ceremonies (Jackson & Nesbitt, 1993; see also Jackson, 1997, pp. 97-98; Jackson & Nesbitt, 1996). Although this experience is in the context of groups – family, caste, religious movement, language class etc – it places children firmly within Hindu tradition, and hardly presents them as having a ‘fragile sense of communal identity’. The wealth of research material referred to here shows that groups themselves are not isolated, but reverberate with one another and often overlap (eg family, caste, religious movement, ethnic group).⁴

It also should be noted that processes of ‘transmission’ take place within a matrix of both traditional and modern plurality. Young people interacting with parents, community leaders, peers from the same background, texts, spiritual teachers etc also interact with other sources of value, and the types and degrees of interaction may vary

over time. A ten year old girl who drew on the spirituality of the Sathya Sai Baba organisation and on a range Gujarati Hindu traditions was additionally finding inspiration from non-Hindu spiritual sources by the time she was in her late teens, for example (Jackson, 2004b, p. 91).

Transcendence, contest and power

Wright suggests that I weaken further a ‘fragile understanding of communal religious identity’ by adding three qualifications to Smith’s view of tradition. These are:

- ‘effectively bypassing transcendent belief as one possible source of religious identity’ (Wright, 2008, p. **);
- claiming that the scope of religious traditions is contested – he claims that my view is that, ‘the best we can hope to do is to *construct* representations whose significance cannot extend beyond the heuristic task of illuminating individual spiritualities’ (his italics) (Wright, 2008, p.**);
- claiming that the process of defining and encompassing a religious tradition is governed by power relations between the parties concerned (Wright, 2008, p. **).

His conclusion is that I claim that religious traditions are ‘merely the accidental sum of individual spiritualities, they are human constructs existing “in name only”’ (Wright, 2008, p. **) and that ‘the representation of religions in the classroom is a useful activity only insofar as it sheds light on the contextual lives of their adherents’ (Wright, 2008, p. **). What I have said above in relation to tradition and groups responds to Wright’s general point. I will deal with his three specific points in turn:

Firstly, he concludes that in rejecting Smith’s concept of faith, I am ‘effectively bypassing transcendent belief as one possible source of religious identity’. Here is the passage to which Wright refers:

Although Smith uses it (*the term ‘faith’*) in a novel and technical sense, it still carries associations from its history in Christian thought, and inherently implies a personal relationship. Despite Smith’s comments on the multifarious ways in which faith can be expressed, the term does not quite fit the range of activities that might be said to constitute a person’s spiritual experience...In

the discussions which follow, we will refer to ‘the individual’ rather than to ‘personal faith’, concentrating on the individual’s language, experiences, feelings and attitudes in a religious context, but taking account of the influence of other types of group. (Jackson, 1997, p. 62)

Wright reads this passage as ‘effectively bypassing transcendent belief as one possible source of religious identity’. It is clear from the text (pp. 62-3) that this was not my intention. I chose not to use the term ‘faith’ as a technical term in order to avoid imposing a Western and mainly Christian concept on to other traditions.⁵ The ‘individual’s language, experiences, feelings and attitudes in a religious context’ include those relating to the transcendent (see, for example, Nesbitt & Jackson, 1995). The expression ‘faith’ – in Smith’s case associated with a specific Christian theological position – is simply regarded as inappropriate as an analytical tool with respect to religious plurality.

Secondly, Wright addresses my view that Smith fails to give attention to disagreements over boundaries of any given tradition.

... Jackson questions Smith’s failure to attend to disagreements over the boundaries of any given tradition. He draws attention to scholarly disputes over the classification of religious traditions, to the ways in which traditions are perceived differently when viewed from differing socio-cultural contexts, to the fact that readings of traditions may be modified as a result on new encounters with them, and to the difference between the perspectives of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. This makes it impossible to provide robust representations of religious traditions, since ‘the precise nature of a tradition will be a matter of negotiation or even contest’ (p. 63). Because representations resulting from such negotiations can never adequately *describe* socio-cultural reality, the best we can hope to do is to *construct* representations whose significance cannot extend beyond the heuristic task of illuminating individual spiritualities. (Wright, 2008, p. **)

As indicated above, despite boundary disputes, I *do* think that it is possible to describe religions, but they are not final or uncontested descriptions. I have also noted

Wright's view (in his concluding sentences) that we should develop representations of religious worldviews that remain 'provisional and open to further revision'. Since Wright holds this view, he himself *must* recognize the reality of boundary disputes.

The heart of Wright's argument lies in his distinction between 'construction' and 'description': With regard to my views, he says, 'Because representations resulting from such negotiations can never adequately *describe* socio-cultural reality, the best we can hope to do is to *construct* representations'. Since Wright devotes more space to discussing this distinction later in his article, I will take the issue up later, clarifying what I mean by 'construction'.

With regard to Wright's third point about power, he shifts deftly from my regarding power as *a factor* in the construction of knowledge to its being '*the driver*'. In doing this he changes my position from a humanistic, critical perspective to a deconstructive stance. My actual position is that, in analysing a representation of a religion or group, one should be alert to the interests of those making the representation, and equally alert to voices within a tradition (those of women or children or marginalised caste groups, for example) which may be not easily be heard (Said, 1978; see also Jackson, 1997, pp. 55-57).

In the context of religious education, there are examples of powerful groups (sometimes government agencies or insider groups) using their power to exclude, marginalise or misrepresent some groups or traditions or to promote the interests of others. For example, powerful 'insider' groups may represent religions in textbooks in ways which further their particular interests, promoting a particular view of a religion (Jackson, 2007b, p. 210 gives the example of Hindu textbook writers with a particular ideological stance representing Hinduism as inclusive of Sikhism and Buddhism). Similarly, loaded accounts of religions or religious groups can be disguised as 'objective' accounts. For example, recent analyses of the subject 'Culture of Religions' in schools in the Russian Federation show how what is represented by the authorities as a non-confessional subject is used to promote nationalism and traditional Orthodox belief (Willems, 2007). James Nelson's account of the manipulation of choices within religious education in Northern Ireland is another example (Nelson, 2004). Japanese education presents a further case, in which Satoko

Fujiwara argues that an avowedly non-confessional programme can, in reality, be politically loaded, in this case cryptically promoting Shinto ethnocentrism through textbook writing (Fujiwara, 2007). None of these examples suggests that representations are *entirely* or even primarily shaped by power, but all illustrate how powerful bodies might distort or misrepresent material in their own interests. The attention to issues of power in the interpretive approach is intended to provide checks and balances against such loaded representations, not to imply that traditions are ‘arbitrary constructions’ devoid of descriptive content.

Dualism and nominalism

In a section headed ‘Jackson’s Dualistic Assumptions’, Wright sets out to present religious traditions as ‘robust social facts’. He starts by claiming to uncover the philosophical assumptions underlying my argument. He represents my philosophical position as both dualist (in Derrida’s sense of binary thinking, of interpreting entities as *either* one thing *or* another) and (since I am supposed to be a dualist who can only think in terms of two possible alternatives when interpreting data) nominalist – that is, I take the view (says Wright) that reality consists of nothing more than the sum of particular objects existing in arbitrary relationship with one other. Having placed me as close to the deconstructive pole as he can, Wright then presents his own critical realist path (in contrast to my supposed dualist, nominalist position) as steering a steady course between the extremes of idealism and nominalism. This position allows the development of descriptions of social and cultural reality, rather than making the assumption (as I am pictured as doing) that social descriptions (like those of religions) are ‘merely arbitrary constructions’.

In writing about my critique of his own position, Wright says ‘Jackson suggests two *possible* interpretations of my position’ (my italics) (Wright, 2008, p. **). He uses this single example to justify his assertion that my thinking is dualistic. The passage is as follows:

One wonders how Wright would classify these children or those British Anglican Christian children whose belief in reincarnation is documented in Leslie Francis’s research (Francis 1984: 75). With regard to the latter, would Wright help them to understand that their belief was perhaps (though not

necessarily) a synthesis of Indian and Christian ideas, or would he feel a duty to wean them off unorthodoxy? (Jackson, 2004a, p. 83)

From this Wright infers:

Jackson's misreading of my position can be attributed to his tendency to think in dualistic terms: *either* my reference to discrete religious traditions is merely a heuristic tool, *or* I am guilty of essentialising and reifying them. (Wright, 2008, p. **)

Although I suggest two ways in which Wright might respond, I do *not* say or mean that these are the *only* 'two *possible* interpretations' he might make. Other possibilities include attempting to find out from what sources the children had learned the idea or eliciting whether the children had simply made a mistake. The inference of philosophical dualism or binary thinking on my part, on the basis of this single comment is remarkable. My work is suffused with examples of non-binary thinking. Anyone who has read it would know that expressions such as 'either she is a Hindu/Christian/Sikh or she is not' would be unlikely to pass my lips. Responses such as '...it depends what you mean by Hindu/Christian/Sikh ...' would be rather more likely!

Wright's unwarranted accusation of binary thinking on my part leads him to an excursus into Derrida on dualism.

[Derrida] argues that we frequently make dualistic distinctions between entities – subject/object, sacred/secular, central/marginal, essential/nominal, pure/contextual etc. As I have noted elsewhere, Derrida claims that such distinctions 'encourage superficial arguments based on simplistic either/or choices and constrain the way we think by inviting us to privilege one side of the equation and marginalise the other' (Wright, 2004, p. 33). My suggestion is that Jackson's reading of my work is dependent on just such binary thinking. (Wright, 2008, p. **)

Wright gives no evidence beyond the single remark referred to above to support his ‘suggestion’. However, he goes even further, in a discussion of the distinction between nominalism and idealism, and proceeds to project a nominalist position on to my work. He cannot place me at the extreme of the nominalist/idealist spectrum (since I explicitly reject antirealism), so he *associates* me with the nominalist pole. ‘Pushed to its logical extreme, nominalism takes a post-modern turn that reduces reality to the arbitrary language games through which we construct imaginary worlds’ (Wright, 2008, p. **). Elsewhere – by sidestepping what I say about groups – he goes further, claiming that my view is that religious traditions are ‘merely the accidental sum of individual spiritualities’ (Wright, 2008, p. **). Having associated me with the nominalist extreme, Wright can then say ‘the conflict between idealism and nominalism (sets) the parameters of the debate, and consequently of imposing a false choice between essential descriptions of religions as unified wholes and nominal descriptions of their fragmented parts’ (Wright, 2008, p. **). I am presented as exemplifying the latter. However, I have already demonstrated that I do *not* regard the only alternative to essentialism as ‘the religiosity of individuals within their local contexts’ or religions as ‘the accidental sum of individual spiritualities’.

Construction

Having asserted that in my work, social descriptions (like those of religions) are ‘merely arbitrary constructions’ (Wright, 2008, p. **), Wright goes on to propose ‘critical description’ as an alternative to ‘construction’. According to Wright, since my account of religions (or religious traditions) ‘contains no descriptive content’, I have ‘no alternative but to *construct* accounts of the religions, and to assess their validity by appealing to a consensus amongst the various interested parties, rather than considering the extent to which they adequately describe socio-cultural reality’ (Wright, 2008, p. **). To Wright what remains unclear in my account ‘is the extent to which a constructed representation... is capable of accurately reflecting socio-cultural reality’ (Wright, 2008, p. **).

The result of Jackson’s re-reading of Smith is a rejection of the notion of religions as ‘bounded and uncontestable systems’, and the limiting of their identity ‘to the various *constructions* of each religious tradition made by different insiders and outsiders’ (p. 64, my italics).). Religious traditions do

not enjoy any substantial formal or structural identity: as merely the accidental sum of individual spiritualities, they are human constructs existing ‘in name only’. (Wright, 2008, p. **)

Wright projects a particular view of constructivism on to my work, despite the fact that there are wide variations in the use of the terms constructivism and constructionism in the literatures of the social sciences and cultural studies (Velody & Williams, 1998). A radical or universal constructionist view, for example, might assert that social reality consists *entirely* of text and discourse (eg. Gergen, 1999). With regard to religion and social construction, Peter Berger takes the very specific view that humans have a basic need to resist chaos through the social construction of sacred frames of meaning (Berger, 1969). When I refer to different constructions of religion or religions I am saying something different from both of these. I am neither advancing an anti-realist view, nor am I making universal claims about religion as a human construct. I am simply recognising, as with other broad patterns of social and cultural life, such as ‘work’, ‘family’, ‘politics’, ‘childhood’, ‘law’, ‘marriage’ and ‘art’, that ‘religion’ and ‘religions’ are social and cultural constructs the meaning of which has changed over time, varies in different cultural situations, and has never been universally agreed. To call a religion a ‘construct’ in this sense no more denies its meaning or ‘reality’ than using the term ‘family’ flexibly to refer to related but different structures of kinship in different societies and how these understandings change over time under the influence of a variety of factors. It is this meaning of social and cultural construction that I take in my own work, and it is similar to that adopted by James Beckford in his work on social theory and religion (Beckford, 2003).⁶

Social facts and collective intentionality

Wright employs John Searle’s idea of collective intentionality, ‘the fact that human beings engage together in cooperative behaviour and share intentional states’, to distinguish between behaving individualistically in a group situation and mutually engaging in a common task. He gives some musical examples to illustrate that the central element in collective intentionality is the sense of deliberately acting together, and then applies the distinction to religion:

...it is not the sum of the individual intentionalities of those who identify themselves as Muslim that produces Islam, but rather the collective intentionality of the Muslim community as a whole. Islam, that is to say, is far more than simply the sum of its parts. (Wright, 2008, p. **)

Searle's view is that collective intentionality predicates 'social facts' rather than 'social constructions'. 'It follows from this', says Wright, 'that the world's religions constitute robust and substantial social facts rather than fragile and arbitrary social constructions' (Wright, 2008, p. **).

Searle's idea of collective intentionality is interesting, as is Wright's discussion of it in the context of religions. In particular, the parallel between 'collective' musical performance and religions is worthy of further analysis. For the moment, I would make three critical points for further discussion and development.

Firstly, I would suggest that analyses of empirical research are very likely to show that experience of collective intentionality in a religious context is far more common in 'group' contexts than in the context of 'whole' religions. With regard to our research on Hindu children in Britain, for example, I have given (above) various examples of mutual engagement in a common task, rather than 'behaving individualistically in a group situation' (Jackson & Nesbitt, 1993). In contrast, there are all too many examples showing a distinct *lack* of collective intentionality when religions are looked at as 'wholes'. For example, there are many intra-religious conflicts, some of which have been or are bitter and bloody, placing a question mark by collective intentionality in relation to religions as wholes.

Secondly, the assertion that individual intentionality 'is both *derived* from and *dependent* upon collective intentionality' needs further discussion. Novelty and creativity can also come from individuals in group situations, whether in music or religion, thus accounting for certain kinds of innovation within groups. For example, the creativity and influence of certain individuals in bringing about the bebop 'revolution' in the jazz of the 1940s is unquestionable, even though the musical 'grammar' of bebop soon became a matter of collective understanding and expression.

Thirdly, the precise status of Wright's application of Searle's idea of a 'social fact' remains unclear to me. Wright adopts Searle's distinction between 'social fact' and 'social construction'; but Searle's understanding of social construction is a very particular one (Searle, 1995), and is certainly different from my own stance. In short, what is the relationship between Wright's view of a 'social fact' and my view of a 'social construction'?

The debate about 'religions' in religious studies

In developing the idea of religions as robust social facts, Wright makes use of Gavin Flood's definition of religions. Wright approves of the fact that Flood 'rejects the extremes of essentialism and relativism', defining religions etymologically as '*value-laden narratives and behaviours that bind people in their objectivities, to each other, and to non-empirical claims and beings*' (Flood, 1999, p. 47). Wright then gives the example of Flood's use of 'prototypical features', applying the idea to his own view of religions as 'social facts'.

Wright does not discuss the implications of his acceptance of Flood's ideas. Flood's definition and general approach, like mine, is an attempt to get 'behind' the inherited assumptions of comparative religion and phenomenology whilst retaining a meaningful and flexible way of discussing 'religion(s)' cross-culturally. Wright's assumption is that my own position is quite different from that of Flood. Scrutiny of the broader debate about 'religions' shows my own and Flood's positions to be closely related.

There are a number of broad positions in the debate about the concepts of 'religion' and 'religions' in the field of religious studies. At the extreme is the family of views that deconstructs religions(s) completely. A good example of this is Timothy Fitzgerald's book *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (2000). Fitzgerald systematically rejects all models for representing religion(s). Through an analysis of various 'world religions' academic texts, and through a rigorous discussion of religion in relation to India and Japan, he reaches the conclusion that religions are 'non-existent objects' and that, consequently, religious studies can claim no distinctive identity as a discipline and should be re-configured as a branch of cultural studies (Fitzgerald, 2000, pp. 221-234).

Another position sees the categories of ‘religion’ and ‘religions’ as originating in the West and having a particular history (the terms are used and applied differently over time, especially since the European Enlightenment and in the history of comparative religion). They continue to be useful analytical categories in relation to sets of beliefs, practices, experiences and values dealing with fundamental existential questions, such as those of birth, identity and death. The terms may have no *direct* semantic equivalent across languages and cultures, but they relate usefully to phenomena exhibiting family resemblances, and sharing a transcendental reference. This position differs from the phenomenological one in that no essence of religion, expressed through common systematic structures exhibited by individual religions, is posited. However, some degree of transcendental reference is a common feature, although different specific meanings are given to this idea.

Gavin Flood’s views (1999) are a variant of this broad position, as are my own (Jackson, 1997, 2003, 2004b, 2007a). My own views are identical to Flood’s in a number of ways, including:

- seeing religion as a category with fuzzy edges and in recognizing that ‘there will always be disputed boundaries’ in the case of religions (Flood, 1999, p. 48).
- recognizing that religions are, at least in part, constructions: ‘the object of enquiry is recognized as being a construction...we recognize religion when we see it, but must reflexively be aware that our recognition partly constructs it’ (*ibid*).
- regarding religion as a category, not with membership dependent on necessary and sufficient conditions, but linked through family resemblance (*ibid*).
- regarding religions as having some kind of transcendental reference (in Flood’s terms, reference to ‘non-empirical claims and beings’) (Flood, 1999, p. 47).
- regarding a focus upon central issues of human life to be characteristic of religions (Flood, 1999, p. 49)
- regarding religions as ‘communicative processes’, conveying information to human recipients, although the process of communication is usually

unintentional (ie most people simply ‘grow up’/are socialized in their inherited traditions) (Flood, 1999, p. 51)

- recognizing contemporary transformations of religion in the context of the forces of globalization and localization (Flood, 1999, pp. 51-52) with moves towards individualization (eg. post-modern syntheses) on the one hand, and towards religious authority (eg. fundamentalisms) on the other (p. 53).

The status of religions as ‘social facts’

If Wright is serious about accepting Flood’s general approach to the representation of religions, he must also acknowledge a degree of interpretation and construction in the idea that religions are ‘social facts’. Wright accepts that, like him, I am not an anti-realist (although he *associates* me with this view). In clarifying our epistemological views in relation to religions, much hinges on my *actual* use of terms such as ‘construction’, rather than Wright’s account of them, and on what he means precisely by expressions such as ‘robust social facts’, ‘substantial social facts’, ‘socio-cultural reality’, and ‘critical description’.

Neither of us is an anti-realist. Equally, neither of us is a naïve realist, believing that we directly perceive the world exactly as it is. Thus, both our epistemological views have to be somewhere between the two positions. Epistemologically speaking, Wright’s view is a version of critical realism. The underlying principle of this seems to be that humans do not experience ‘reality’ independently of the human observer, but as it appears to observers through their distinctively human cognitive means of perception. Thus, critical realism seems to be compatible with interpretation, and therefore with some forms of constructivism.

However, Wright’s claim that ‘the ongoing scholarly struggle (is) to develop evermore accurate descriptions of the religions’ (Wright, 2008, p. **) suggests he might consider there to be some final and undisputed account of religions that can be uncovered by scholarship. My view is different; the fact that religions elude straightforward description testifies to the richness of texture and abundance of reality. Traditions such as ‘Hinduism’ cannot be comprehensively and finally described, not because they are not ‘real’, but because they cannot be encapsulated in a single set of words. Our descriptions are not inventions. However, like biographies,

with sources edited and crafted by individuals at specific times in particular contexts, they cannot fully capture reality.

Conclusion

With reference to my own work, and also to the caricature of it presented in Wright's article, I have attempted to clarify my own views on the representation of religions. In conclusion, it is worth pointing out that, although there are some important differences in our views, there is also scope for further discussion and clarification. Moreover, whatever our differences, we share a commitment to a number of key principles and values in religious education. For example, both of us seek to devise pedagogies that do not to impose our own epistemological views on pupils studying religion in schools. In this regard, I talk about 'epistemological openness' (eg. Jackson, 1997, pp. 125-6), and Wright affirms that religious education should help students to clarify and formulate their own views (eg. Wright, 1996). Also, both of us take an inclusive approach to religious education, regarding the subject and its open exploration as available to all students, regardless of their religious or secular views (Jackson, 1997, 2004b, 2007a; Wright, 2006).

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¹ There is no space available to summarise the interpretive approach to religious education. Accounts of the approach can be read, for example, in Jackson, 1997, 2004b Chapter 6, and 2006.

² The first is from a paper by the Norwegian researcher Heid Leganger-Krogstad, the second from the German scholar Heinz Streib, writers with different positions whose work deserves specific attention.

³ The fact that Western influences on some portrayals of 'Hinduism' can be exposed does not preclude attempts at more nuanced general accounts of Hindu tradition that try to get behind inter-textually transmitted assumptions and structures (see Jackson, 1996 for a discussion of the literature on Western influences on the formation of the concept of 'Hinduism').

⁴ Moreover, the hermeneutical process of comparing examples with the general description outlined above *does* provide criteria for discussing the relationship of particular examples to the wider tradition. (See, for example, Arweck, Nesbitt & Jackson, 2005).

⁵ The use of Western and often Christian concepts when discussing other traditions was a feature of some writing in the phenomenology of religion (Jackson, 1997, pp. 14-29).

⁶ In projecting other meanings of social construction on to my work, Wright is highly selective in his citations. For example, he does not refer to the following passage which refers specifically to the stance on 'social construction' taken within the research project 'Ethnography and Religious Education' and its associated curriculum project 'The Warwick RE Project':

Does our approach, with its underlying critique of the ways 'religions' have been represented in much Western literature, imply a view that knowledge is socially constructed, with 'truth' being relative to each constructed way of life? It is certainly the case that our project assumes that at least *some* aspects of knowledge are 'socially constructed'... This is different from asserting that *all* knowledge is socially constructed and that the notion of 'ultimate truth' has no meaning. (Jackson, 1997, p. 125)