

The World Religions paradigm

Time for a change

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ABSTRACT

The teaching of religions has long relied on the World Religions paradigm to guide curricula throughout education, which has led to a widening gap, on the one hand, between what is taught in schools and in universities and, on the other, between research and teaching. While the World Religions paradigm has allowed the inclusion of non-Christian religions in education, it has also remodelled them according to liberal Western Christian values, influencing the conception of 'religion' beyond educational contexts. This article argues that it is time to discard the World Religions paradigm altogether in favour of a more critical approach to the study of religion, as a constructed category, as well as a study of religions in their contexts.

KEYWORDS *critical thinking, humanities, religious education, religious studies, World Religions*

RELIGIOUS STUDIES HAS often been accused by those in other academic disciplines of being, well, 'unacademic'. Like theology, for which it is often mistaken, it is viewed as subjective and unempirical.¹ In some respects, these criticisms are justified, especially if what its critics regard as 'religious studies' is based on their experience of religious education in schools, which contrasts strongly with the subject as it is researched by specialists and taught in many upper-level undergraduate courses in Religious Studies degrees. However, lower-level undergraduate courses, ones generally taken as electives by other students, continue for the most part to teach religions according to a model that is subjective (biased) and unempirical (based on essentialisms rather

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than ethnographic and historical data), referred to as the World Religions paradigm, with the justification that this is what students expect, this is what they are taught in schools and what has been reflected in the media and government policies where religion is concerned. Therefore, the concerns of this article are two-fold: my first is the widening gap between academic research in religious studies and the teaching of that subject, particularly as teaching in universities is meant to be 'research-informed'; my second is the gulf between religious education in secondary schools and religious studies at university. The main culprit is the continued presence of the World Religions paradigm, integrated throughout the education system through the work of scholars such as Ninian Smart, who, with others, in 1969 formed the Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education with that explicit aim (Smart, 1993: ix).

For comparative purposes, scholars have placed the different manifestations of religion into various categories separated according to criteria chosen beforehand. The divisions could be decided along historical lines, e.g. 'primitive, classical, living', or geographically. The most popular typology divides World Religions from other religions. The World Religions generally include Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism, with many lists including Sikhism and also Zoroastrianism and Baha'i, organized first geographically and then historically in textbooks and most modules covering them. Other religions include various New Religious Movements and the indigenous traditions of Africa, North America, China, Japan and so on. Suthren Hirst and Zavos describe the World Religions paradigm thus:

This model conceptualises religious ideas and practice as being configured by a series of major religious systems that can be clearly identified as having discrete characteristics. These systems are seen as existing alongside each other in a common space in the global fields of cultural, social and political life. They apparently compete, have dialogue with each other, regenerate themselves or degenerate within this space; a series of systems, then, with their own historical agency. (Suthren Hirst and Zavos, 2005: 5)

As 'isms' (Buddhism, Hinduism, etc.), the World Religions have been presented as fairly cohesive systems with texts, doctrine, places of worship, etc.

CRITICS OF THE WORLD RELIGIONS PARADIGM

Many scholars have questioned the World Religions paradigm, one key publication being Jonathan Z. Smith's *Map is Not Territory*, which points out that other traditions can be classified as 'religions' if they conform to the criteria set by the West, which basically follows the Christian model of religion (1978: 295). More critiques followed (Fitzgerald, 1990; Shaw, 1990) and,

while the paradigm continues to dominate the study of religions, scholars continue to question it (Bell, 2006; Cox, 2007; Masuzawa, 2005). According to Tomoko Masuzawa (2005: 2–3; see also Cox, 2007: 33), the paradigm emerged in the nineteenth century in order to divide Western religions from others, into binary (East–West) or tripartite (West–South Asia–Far East) classifications. Problems include the number of World Religions, the criteria for their selection and the exclusion of other religions. Catherine Bell questions this aspect of the World Religions paradigm:

The aura of comparable qualities is, of course, historically and theologically misleading for each religion. Finally, what does a list of eight world religions say about the other religions not included? That they simply do not loom large enough in the world? That they are confined to national entities and thus do not hold the promise of generating a transnational community? Or, that they do not fit the model/prototype used and so may not even technically qualify as religions after all? (Bell, 2006: 34–5)

World Religions, above all, do not represent indigenous expressions, nor do they represent the whole of any given tradition: Hinduism as a World Religion does not include Hinduism as a village religion (the domain of the anthropologist), and ‘while Hindus may recognize spirit cults, Hinduism does not’ (Goody, 1986: 21, quoted in King, 1999: 68).

In *Orientalism and Religion*, Richard King argues that there is a textual bias in the creation of the concept of ‘world religion’ and that the ostensible nature of written texts reflects ‘the supreme example of decontextualization, since they even become independent of their authors . . . The universalizing aspects of literacy therefore provide a means of idealizing religion and locating it within the abstract world of the text’ (King, 1999: 2, 66). Therefore, literature is to blame for effectively allowing ‘certain world-views to spread beyond their particular and local context and become “world religions”’ (King, 1999: 65). The result of this is that the emphasis on World Religions hierarchizes the diverse traditions within each broadly defined religion (usually the earliest form, such as the Buddhism of the Pāli texts, is presented as the norm, while later forms, such as Mahāyāna Buddhism, may be excluded altogether or only given a brief overview) and marginalizes localized expressions. Illustrating the independent nature of texts from the actual religion as practised, King writes:

When studying Sanskrit and Pāli texts for the sources of Hindu and Buddhist religious expression we are, of course, focusing on the literature of the élite. Neither Sanskrit nor Pāli are vernacular languages, thus they cannot reflect the religious opinions of the non-literate masses in anything other than an indirect manner. (King, 1999: 66)

The emphasis on ‘sacred texts’ and the promotion of universalized essentialist concepts of religion reflect a subtle process of colonialism in the study of

religions by a 'literary (and largely male) élite', thus marginalizing a 'significant proportion of human religious experience and expression' and suppressing 'the heterogeneity of religious expression' (King, 1999: 67–8). King believes this is largely due to the nature of Christianity itself. 'Many forms of Christianity uphold an essentialist and universalizing self-image, grounded in the firm belief in the transcendental and ahistorical nature of the Christian message' (King, 1999: 69). The example he gives is from Augustine's *The City of God*, which distinguishes between the temporal Church and the 'true' Church existing beyond space and time. As is well documented from the first council of Nicaea onward, Christianity does not easily tolerate heterodoxy.

Religious studies has changed since Richard King's critique in as far as it has tried to include the 'other religions', such as indigenous traditions. Where there is an absence of 'sacred texts', particularly in the case of more localized forms of religion, ethnographies or texts by members themselves, such as *Black Elk Speaks* by the Lakota holy man of that name (in collaboration with John G. Neihardt, originally published in 1932), act as substitutes. However, the World Religions paradigm still predominates and guides how the 'other religions' are presented. For example, in his useful introduction to *Indigenous Religions: A Companion* (2000), Graham Harvey explains the fallacy of creating a category such as 'world religion' and argues that indigenous religions should receive the same respectful treatment. He is addressing primarily religious studies departments that continue to relegate indigenous religions as relatively unimportant in 'global' terms or as obsolete and soon-to-be-extinct. This emphasis on texts in religious studies has created a division based on imperialist colonial visions of 'us' and 'them', between the religions of the so-called civilized, modern or educated peoples and those of the so-called traditional, backward and uneducated peoples. Graham Harvey suggests we take seriously indigenous religions as World Religions (Harvey, 2000: 3).

James L. Cox, in a timely volume *From Primitive to Indigenous* (2007), traces the development of indigenous religions as an academic subject and provides case studies from Alaska and Zimbabwe. In chapter 2, 'Essentialism and the World Religions paradigm', Cox argues that the World Religions paradigm is inherently theological. As Cox points out, textbooks continue to be published assuming the reality of the World Religions paradigm and he recommends replacing it with a 'socio-cultural contextualised' 'science of religion' (2007: 74) based on empirical observation (2007: 79). With this I agree, but Cox himself does not go far enough to challenge the paradigm. Despite outlining the problem of grouping together a wide range of phenomena and classing it within a World Religions paradigm, he more or less does just that by arguing for the addition of another category – indigenous religions – to be considered equal to and alongside *other* World Religions. We see, then, how this

paradigm affects the way we present other traditions that may not even be considered 'religious' by indigenous peoples themselves, many of whom insist that 'traditional spirituality' is not a 'religion' precisely because it does not have texts, doctrines and religious institutions, and includes socio-political-economic dimensions (what religion does not include these?).

Many institutions in the United Kingdom have not rushed to include in the curriculum indigenous religions or 'alternative' religions in general, partly because they are not seen as relevant to the aims of fostering cultural understanding in British society, despite the growth of traditions such as Paganism and their capacity to challenge our value-laden categories. Instead, the study of religions at university remains focused on World Religions.

THE HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION

Other subjects in the humanities may offer part of the solution. With human values and expressions as its focus, religious studies has much in common with other humanities subjects and shares with them some issues regarding its purpose in academia. Jonathan Jacobs, in the abstract of his article 'Humanities and the recovery of the real world', says a 'humanistic study leads to a textured, penetrating comprehension of diverse valuative matters and concerns' (2009: 26). A value-laden concept if ever there was one, 'religion' is a contentious category (Smith, 1998), but one that has semantic and cultural meaning in contemporary society. Although it is differently understood, depending on context and who is speaking, it is nevertheless popularly employed to refer to *something*, and this is what religious studies can ably examine, as well as what is excluded from this category and the ramifications of such exclusion. However, as long as it continues to employ the World Religions paradigm as a default approach (even after deconstructing it), religious studies will fail in its humanistic task. It may be in the business of 'knowledge transfer', replicating a paradigm whether or not it is empirically valid, but could encourage more 'knowledge questioning', which is a key strength of the humanities, noted in an editorial of an earlier edition of this journal by Alison Phipps:

Humanities methodologies begin from the point of view that criticality and questioning are the default position, bringing to any and every text a hermeneutic of suspicion, a refusal to accept what is written . . . at face value, instead working to consider what this language might tell us about its authors. (Phipps, 2009: 6)

Religious studies needs to employ more seriously a 'hermeneutic of suspicion', as the title of one of Russell McCutcheon's books on the subject indicates: *Critics not Caretakers* (2001). The humanities in general are about 'critical engagement' with culture and knowledge, not just knowledge transfer.

Yet, the World Religions paradigm is an uncritical approach to studying religions. It claims to be based on 'description', coming as it does out of the phenomenological approach to religion, a method of describing observable 'religious' data which is then verified against the believers' points of view, according to phenomenologists such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1959) and W. Brede Kristensen (1960). But upon whose description is the World Religions paradigm based?

While the World Religions paradigm was brought in to allow the inclusion of non-Christian religions in education, it has instead remodelled them according to liberal Western Protestant Christian values (akin to what the Church of England promotes), emphasizing theological categories. An example of this transformation can be seen in the following example: in order to fulfill certain criteria for recognition as an official religion in Scotland, the Pagan Federation, an umbrella organization representing different pagan traditions, had to create key tenets to which all pagans could subscribe, including 'recognition of the Divine'.²

In universities, those engaged in the study of religions are aware of the problem and many are attempting to move away from the World Religions paradigm to a more critical approach to 'religion' as a constructed category, but, because of student expectations, find themselves teaching the paradigm, at least in introductory modules. Many students have an initial resistance to alternatives – the majority of students I teach are intending to go into education and panic when the World Religions paradigm is not adhered to, as in a first-year module at Leeds Trinity University College that begins by taking a thematic approach with topics such as space (including questions about what makes a space 'religious'), pilgrimage and authority, before introducing different religious traditions, which unfortunately, when these are taught as distinct entities, reinforces the idea that religion is separate from culture. This demonstrates the gulf between research on religion and how it is presented in the classroom.

RESEARCH AND TEACHING

I am aware that many of my colleagues in religious studies are not always able to bring much of their research into their teaching, and, in some cases, may be teaching World Religions without personally subscribing to the concept. In most cases, after presenting the World Religions paradigm, they spend another several sessions trying to dismantle it. However, the World Religions paradigm does have supporters in religious studies. In his review of Masuza's

Invention of World Religions, Robert Segal asks,

does the use of the term in introductory courses and textbooks really evince the thinking of scholars? . . . As long as the criteria used for the category are explicit, and as long as the category identifies significant aspects of religion, why not still employ it? (Segal, 2007: 48)

The problem is that, whichever criteria are used for categorizing World Religions, an essentialization and decontextualization of religion occurs. The paradigm is itself historically and socially constituted (in 1960s Britain, reflecting the socio-political concerns of the day), but this is often overlooked as it is perceived to be ahistorical and universal, applied equally to 'dead' religions as to living ones. In response to Segal's question, the following are reasons why the World Religions paradigm should no longer be employed in the classroom, not only because it does not 'evince the thinking of scholars', but also for its political ramifications.

Research in the study of religions is diverse, usually specializing in a particular religion or type of religion or geographical area. There are also those who specialize in theoretical or methodological concerns. A typical undergraduate degree in religious studies includes both strands – a study of religions strand and one focused on approaches to the study of religions. As an interdisciplinary subject, religious studies employs methodologies from theology, history, sociology and so on. Often, as a result, our research takes us beyond 'religious' concerns to the historical, political, sociological, etc. Typically, when it comes to teaching, we need to decontextualize the 'religious' content, overemphasizing the 'transcendental' aspects and, if teaching within the World Religions paradigm, the essential components of a tradition in an abstracted form. In other words, an ideal version of a religion is presented, while other forms are excluded or relegated as aberrant, corrupted adaptations or, if more than one religious tradition is being practised, 'hybridizations'. As research has shown, even Christians in England defy such categorization by 'dabbling' in other religions, such as holding a belief in reincarnation (Stringer, 2008: 38–9). Only certain priests and theologians might practise anything close to a 'text-book' version of Christianity. What is presented as 'religion' in this case is the elite view of the educated religious specialist, and the one most often taught in the classroom, despite the fact that what most Christians (or Muslims or Hindus, etc.) actually think or do is often quite different. In general, the World Religions paradigm does not fit the data, and expressions that do not fit the categories become marginalized (Oberoi, 1994: 1; Suthern Hirst and Zavos, 2005: 5). As Ron Geaves points out,

this methodological compartmentalisation does not reveal that religious conviction and practice is often messy, idiosyncratic and differently articulated, particularly in the

context of South Asian traditions that did not generally draw upon discourses like that of Christian exclusivism or compartmentalisation until European colonisation. (Geaves, 2005: 76–7)

This leads us to the ramifications of the paradigm, which affects how religions are perceived and presented elsewhere, as in media and politics.

Religions as bounded categories are presumed in national Census questions, for example. In the 2001 Census in Canada, only 50 First Nations in Newfoundland and Labrador said they followed ‘traditional spirituality’ (the majority of Mi’kmaq, at least, are Catholic), yet in practice the numbers are far greater (in any case, the revitalization of traditional spirituality among First Nations should not be separated from their efforts to gain political recognition). One Newfoundland Mi’kmaq woman told me she followed traditional spirituality, Catholicism and Deepak Chopra. The Census question for religion ought to indicate that people can tick as many boxes as apply! The Census upholds the World Religions paradigm, which presumes that people ‘belong’ to a faith, in the singular – which stumped Peter Owen Jones when he came across Muslim women in Indonesia who also believed in ‘spirits’; he told one woman that she was contradictory (BBC, 2009). For Owen Jones, it is not possible to be a Muslim and believe in ‘spirits’ at the same time. What would he make of atheists who are also members of a ‘faith’?

It is not just those in the West who are apt to cling to the World Religions paradigm, even when faced with contradictory evidence; the paradigm also affects the conceptualization of religion in other regions of the world, as Geaves indicates in the above quotation, and Suthren Hirst and Zavos point out in their article on the problem of ‘religion’ in South Asian contexts. Suthren Hirst and Zavos observe that there are political implications of categorizing religions as discrete entities in an academic context (2005: 6). They quote Mary Searle-Chatterjee, who warns that ‘the assumptions underlying much academic usage of the terms “Hindu” and “Hinduism” in Britain are consonant with the radical claims of right-wing Hindu nationalists’ (Searle-Chatterjee, 2000: 497). Such categorization privileges and authenticates certain ideas about religion, and therefore it is the responsibility of scholarship to destabilize essentialist views of religion that are exclusive. In practice, popular religiosity cuts across such boundaries, as those researching South Asian religions point out (Fitzgerald, 1990; Geaves, 2005; King, 1999; Oberoi, 1994; Suthren Hirst and Zavos, 2005). As the method of categorizing religions as discrete entities based on belief appears to have its roots in post-Enlightenment European Christianity, it is not universal, as evidenced by Census data from India in the nineteenth century (carried out by the British). In the Punjab, a million Sikhs identified themselves as Hindu, while in Gujarat, 200,000

indicated they were ‘Muhammadan Hindus’ (Oberoi, 1994: 11; see also Geaves, 2005: 76).

This is discussed further in the article by Ron Geaves. After undertaking extensive fieldwork among communities in Britain originating from the Punjab, he discovered that:

During this research, it became clear that while labels such as ‘Muslim’, ‘Sikh’ and ‘Hindu’ are becoming increasingly important to South Asians as terms of self-identification, the diversity of belief and practice within and across each community and the degree of eclectic blurring of the usual categorization of religions called into question the simple labelling of discrete traditions in consonance with the ‘world religions’ paradigm. (Geaves, 2005: 75)

This is reinforced in educational contexts, where children of immigrants learn the ideal types of Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, etc., which do not match their family’s more eclectic or syncretic tradition. For this reason, Geaves is also arguing for a research-informed religious education in schools:

If syllabuses and teachers ignore this, supported by powerful voices from within particular religious traditions . . . their essentialisations and the authority with which they are perceived to speak will contribute to the marginalisation of particular pupils, groups and practices. (Geaves, 2005: 79)

Outside of education, it is largely fundamentalists who defend exclusivist categorizations of religion. This is the case with nationalist forms of Hinduism, which now try to remove ‘foreign’ elements. Geaves (2005: 80) says, ‘the growth of a Western-dominated world cultural system may contribute further to this renaissance of supposedly pure forms of religion that are being posited in order to assert regional and national identities’. This suits those who claim to represent orthodoxy and supports the suppression and marginalization of other traditions and sections of the community, such as women and those who might challenge the perceived orthodoxy (Geaves, 2005: 82–4).

From these examples, it is apparent that both our teaching and our research at university affects perceptions of ‘religion’ in education and beyond, and it is clear that a critical approach needs to be engaged with in the classroom as well as in our research. However, there is little support for this within institutions and from government agencies, not least from the Quality Assurance Agency Benchmarks for Theology and Religious Studies (it is bad enough that it combines these two areas). Their guidelines for a Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) degree lack theoretical content as they mostly recommend the investigation of religions as subjects rather than the nature or categorization of these and other ideologies (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2007). Created as a support for lecturers, the Philosophy and Religious

Studies (PRS) Subject Centre for Higher Education (<http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk>) also appears resistant to current developments away from the World Religions paradigm, judging by their presentations at British Association for the Study of Religions (BASR) conferences, which, in 2008, included a presentation on a student project to produce guides to places of worship.

Generally, the PRS view of religious studies follows the World Religions paradigm. For example, they have produced 'faith guides' for Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, etc., treating them as bounded subjects, creating the binary of exclusive categories of 'believers' and 'non-believers', a Western Christian perspective of 'religion' as a cognitive process based on set creeds and doctrines. The guides seem more suited to secondary school level as they do not challenge the way we think about 'religion/s' and how this categorization, standard throughout the education system, has influenced the way people think about 'religion' in the media and more generally in society. They are, actually, primarily aimed at non-specialists in the higher education sector, but we should no longer be teaching or presenting 'religion' like this at any level. The faith guides may fulfill a certain need, but they only add to the problem, which is the persistence of the World Religions paradigm in education, in the media and in society at large. It is shaping how we think about religions (as discrete entities based on doctrines and as providers of universal moral values) and how religions present themselves. For this reason, PRS needs to include a wider range of perspectives and approaches, even if they contradict one another.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SCHOOL

Even if the subject at university changes, the problem will persist as the majority of people gain most of their knowledge and understanding of religions while at school. One can argue that religious education (RE) at school teaches 'morality', while humanities subjects at university in general aim to teach critical thinking. Some understanding of the nature of RE can highlight problems with the World Religions paradigm and its hidden agenda. In England, guidance on the teaching of religion in schools and in the wider community is provided by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's national framework.³ It is less concerned with 'religions' than with moral education: 'The focus of the framework is to set out a system that places value on the ethos and morals that religious education can establish, independent of any faith' (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA], 2004: 3). The booklet begins with an image of children's bodies laid out to spell 'PEACE' (QCA, 2004: 6). This is the actual aim of religious education in a

nutshell – to foster peace and harmony, not the study of religions, which are merely a means to that end.

After several pages outlining its further aims on the moral and social spheres and the legal status of RE, the national framework provides curriculum guidance. In primary education, at Key Stages 1–3, the curriculum should include three elements: religions and beliefs; themes ('learning about' and 'learning from' religion); and experiences and opportunities (QCA, 2004: 11). Under 'religions and beliefs' it specifies that Christianity should be taught throughout the Key Stages, and that the other 'five principal religions' (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism) should be taught by the end of Key Stage 3. The curriculum should also provide opportunities for pupils to study Baha'i, Jain, Zoroastrian and humanist views (QCA, 2004: 12). This is quite a task for any teacher to be able to present accurately, even if they are able to invite guest speakers. As few teachers can be expected to be familiar with all six 'faiths', these are in danger of being taught superficially. For pupils aged 14–19, the national framework stresses the development of 'positive attitudes to their learning and the beliefs and values of others', without specifying which religions ought to be covered (QCA, 2004: 13), although, at this level, the framework does expect students to develop critical thinking (QCA, 2004: 30).

The confusion in the aims of RE stems from its themes: 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion, indicating that there are two different tasks in RE with the first relying on the World Religions paradigm and the latter a form of moral philosophy. In 'learning from' religions, pupils are meant to reflect on and respond to 'their own and others' experiences in light of their learning about religion' (QCA 2004: 11). In the process, the 'religions', in their essentialized and distorted forms, become foils in this enterprise. The problem is illustrated aptly in this primary education example given by Margaret Barratt when discussing the 'learning about' and 'learning from' model. Taking the Sanskrit term *ahimsa*, non-violence or harmlessness (misleadingly referred to as a Buddhist concept), she suggests relating it to children's care of pets (Barratt, 1993: 5), which distorts the idea of *ahimsa*. Therefore, the idea of 'learning from' religions has little to do with the religions themselves, but has everything to do with encouraging certain types of behaviour in children. This enters the realm of morality and ethics and blurs the boundary between RE and PSME (Personal, Social and Moral Education). For example, 'Buddhism' is taught primarily through the Eightfold Path and the Five Precepts, which are the nearest Buddhist equivalents to the Ten Commandments. This is more overt in Scotland, where the subject is usually known as Religious and Moral Education and includes a 'personal quest' element. There is a general misconception that morality is learned from religions (it is learned from all

subjects, and elsewhere), which in any case emphasizes a doctrinal approach to religions.

In England, authors such as Barnes and Wright (2006) and Watson and Thompson (2007) propose a 'critical RE', which sounds good until one reads further. Philip Barnes and Andrew Wright (2006: 73), despite their insistence that RE must begin with a 'mutual acceptance of diversity', suggest that 'critical RE' is concerned with ultimate truth. Differences such as the view of Jesus as prophet in Islam or son of God in Christianity must be critically engaged with, in their view, but critics may point out that this is a return to the old discourse 'concerned with Christian Truth, which was tied in a binary relationship with Pagan falsehood' (Critical Religion Category Network⁴), or, in this case, with Muslim or Christian falsehood (if there is an ultimate truth). Barnes and Wright suggest debate and the 'pursuit of truth', defined as 'the order-of-things, the way things actually are in reality' (2006: 74). How can students debate such different claims in order to arrive at 'truth' (or 'truthful living', for that matter), particularly if they are already committed to one set of 'truths'? The Buddha would respond to questions about ultimate truth with silence. This example given by Barnes and Wright links to Richard King's analysis above that the study of religions is heavily influenced by Christian concerns about truth and doctrine, embodied in the World Religions paradigm, which may be veiled at university level but is quite overt in RE, where it is a form of Christian apologetics focusing on doctrinal concerns. Correct ritual practice, the ultimate concern, perhaps, in many non-Christian religions, is rarely discussed. This doctrinal focus is apparent in Andrew Wright's book *Critical Religious Education*, where he states:

One of the intended outcomes of the hermeneutical circle is clear: in order to enhance their moral development pupils ought to strive to establish, to the best of their ability, true beliefs about the ultimate nature of reality by exploring a range of different religious and secular beliefs systems. (Wright, 2007: 108)

This exemplifies the gulf between religious education and religious studies in universities, as, according to this model, RE (really moral education – Scottish schools have it right) is about arriving at 'true beliefs', instilling moral values and producing good citizens. religious studies is about understanding how religions shape society (and vice versa), and how such ideologies inspire human rights, social upliftment, political change, and also the oppression, exclusion and, in some cases, the obliteration of other peoples. It is about much more, of course, but the aims are clearly different, although they are both trying to foster 'critical thinking'.

The World Religions approach to RE has been critiqued by Andrew Bolton (1993), in ways which highlight the problem with the

paradigm as a whole. Although his model for RE, emphasizing beliefs and values, is more suitable for Christianity, he does show that World Religions as a subject is untenable in secondary education. A table (1993: 16) showing differences between what Bolton positively presents as a 'student-centred' approach to RE, where students explore the meaning of life for themselves, and what he negatively presents as a 'religion-centred' approach, where students learn 'the facts' about a few religions and 'find their inherited world view devalued by not being included', highlights the pitfalls of the World Religions approach to studying religion. This is an important point that applies to 'survey' modules on various religions taught at undergraduate level. When it comes to knowledge and understanding of 'religion/s', RE (and undergraduate survey modules) fails or is unable to fulfil that aim adequately with its current structure. Therefore, I argue it is time to discard the World Religions paradigm throughout the education system, as it no longer serves the needs of religious studies in either secondary or higher education.

CONCLUSION

Religious studies needs to participate more fully in the humanities project as cultural criticism, not just offer another way of understanding the 'human'. This questioning can be dangerous – it means shattering world views, not creating them, which is arguably the agenda of religious education in schools and one reason why there is a gulf between school and university education. Being multidisciplinary, religious studies is also in a position to bridge the humanities and social sciences, blending the historical and textual approaches of the former with the ethnographic research methods of the latter. This is another strength I believe religious studies can bring to humanities – a dialogue with the social sciences – and to academia in general. After I presented a paper at a Native Studies conference in 2009 on concepts of Mi'kmaq healing, a historian and an anthropologist both claimed my approach as theirs, not realizing I am in religious studies. They meant this positively, while others might say this is the problem with religious studies – that by being a 'jack of all trades' it is 'master of none', a presumption that affects religious studies graduates, I fear, when they apply for jobs or postgraduate courses in other academic subject areas. These presumptions exist among the general public (including academics in other disciplines) because of the confusion created by the conflicting agendas of religious education in school.

Having experienced teaching in secondary schools (where materials for religious education were dominated by the World Religions paradigm), and later teaching primary education student teachers, my suspicion has been

confirmed that religious education is really 'moral education', focusing on the abstract ethical codes from different cultural systems, but only from those that bear a resemblance to modern liberal Western Christian moral sensibilities. There are other approaches and models current for religious education, such as the one put forward by Andrew Wright, but all generally accept the World Religions paradigm, which focuses on the investigation of religions as subjects rather than the nature or categorization of religion and other ideologies. This transfers into students' expectation in the university. In secondary schools, I would propose separating religious education into two subjects, moral philosophy and religious studies, based on a cultural studies approach, and to discard the idea of 'world religions' altogether as a central guiding paradigm. At university, students can specialize in theology, which follows on from moral philosophy, or in religious studies, which would progress more logically from a cultural study of religions undertaken in secondary education.

On the whole, religious studies departments are still constrained by the World Religions paradigm for various reasons, such as the expectations of students and institutional concerns. This affects recruitment, as they continue to advertise posts for specialists in a particular religion rather than for someone who is a specialist in the study of religion. University undergraduate courses continue to teach descriptions of particular religions in turn, divided according to historical and geographical criteria. However, departments these days cannot afford to have a specialist in each of the World Religions, especially if they have to share the department with a dozen theologians and biblical scholars. Several departments are trying to find alternative approaches, but the World Religions paradigm is still growing vigorously in primary and secondary schools and thus continues to inform the non-specialists who inhabit the media and political arenas.

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NOTES

1. To generalize, theology searches for meaning while religious studies examines different ways of meaning-making.
2. This was brought to my attention originally by Pauline Kennedy of the Pagan Federation (Scotland). Owing to requirements in Scottish law, members, upon joining, agree to 'three principles'. Briefly, they are 'love for and kinship with Nature'; 'a positive morality' ('do what you will, as long as it harms none', based on the contemporary Wiccan oath); and 'recognition of the Divine' (available at: <http://www.scottishpf.org/princ.html>). Members in England and Wales are not required to subscribe to these.

3. In Scotland the equivalent is the Scottish Qualifications Authority, and in Wales it is the Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales.
4. The Critical Religion Category Network was set up by Timothy Fitzgerald at the University of Stirling (crcn_stir_ac_uk.htm, accessed 01.09.09; see also <http://staff.stir.ac.uk/jairo.lugo/Timo7/index.htm>).

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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