

Religious literacy: spaces of teaching and learning about religion and belief

Religious literacy has emerged as a commonplace term (amongst other identified and multiple literacies, e.g. media literacy, financial literacy, coding literacy) in education over the past 20 years, deemed to be a necessary component for successful citizenship across contemporary societies. Specifically, religious literacy is said to entail ‘the ability to discern and analyse the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses’. A religiously literate person is described as possessing: ‘a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world’s religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts’ and ‘the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place’. Crucially, the religiously literate person will understand ‘religions and religious influences in context and as inextricably woven into all dimensions of human experience’ (Moore 2015, 30–31). Far from simply knowing the ‘facts’ about religion/s a religiously literate person will have managed to get ‘under the skin’ of religious life. They will, to use different terminologies, be able to imagine what it is like to exist within the schema of another’s worldview.

What is the relationship between religious education and religious literacy? How do they differ? Does religious literacy serve as a proxy, or a replacement for, religious education?

To a degree religious literacy has been an aspirational term the UK for what religious education should be or become (see especially the work and influence of Adam Dinham and Martha Shaw’s work in the RE for REal project [Dinham and Shaw 2015]). A religious literacy approach to religious education is said to move the subject away from its political purposes of community ‘cohesion and citizenship’ towards ‘preparing students for the practical task of engagement with the rich variety of religion and belief encounters in everyday, ordinary life’ (3). Reconceptualising religious education in religious literacy terms have given substance to calls for the subject’s reform by imagining it in a different way as having a different function. Despite this, and interestingly, the Religious Education’s Commission on RE did not utilise the term ‘religious literacy’ to describe the purposes of the subject within its recommended rebadging of it as ‘religion and worldviews’ in its final report. One wonders why not? (Religious Education Council, 2018)

However, religious literacy is not religious education, nor is it religion and worldviews. Religious literacy describes the *abilities* to be accrued across, and by means of, a student’s religious education. Religious literacy is therefore not the subject as such, it is an aim of the subject (the subject may have other aims), whether that subject be called religious education or religion and worldviews. Alternatively expressed, religious education may

be conceived of as *religious literacy education*. Religious literacy terminology thus has the potential to *reframe* and *refine* what religious education is for.

Moreover, as Francis and Dinham observe (2015, 257) religious literacy is not only applicable to the subject of religious education in schools, it is a capacity which may be developed by training in differing contexts and having contrasting national requirements and specificities. What it means to be religiously literate in, for example, care work in the UK may differ to the requirement to be religiously literate in care work in another national context. Religious literacy is thereby a flexible term, the substance of which is contingent upon circumstance and setting.

As with religious literacy, biblical literacy defines itself as more than simply remembering, whether that be facts about religion or the details of the verses and stories of Bible. Just as being religiously literate means being cognisant, and to a degree empathetic of, what aspects of religion might mean to an adherent, so being biblically literate is concerned with moving beyond a surface knowledge of the biblical text towards how it is used and deployed in culture, literature and political life, and what meaning it is given in the present (Crossley 2015). I am struck, for example, by how the symbol of the rainbow has been deployed in recent COVID-19 pandemic in the UK as a symbol to celebrate the workers of the National Health Service and a sense of hopefulness, disconnected from its biblical origins, even if alluding to them. To be biblically literate is to understand how the narrative is being deployed as much as knowing the facts of its rootedness in the Bible.

What is the relationship between religious literacy and biblical literacy? Should it remain an aim of religious education/religion and worldview that children should be biblically literate? Clearly both religious and biblical literacies are about being 'streetwise' in relation to religion and the Bible (to borrow from Amanda Dillon (Dillon, 2015), that is to grasp nuances of belief and the subtleties of allusion to the Bible in culture. Even so, developing this 'sixth sense' in matters religious/biblical still requires, I think, a grounding in the facts of religions and the texts and narratives of scripture. Religious education/religion and worldviews as religious literacy education still have to face the pedagogical challenge of laying the foundations of literacy upon a secure knowledge of the 'facts' of religion.

This special issue deals with the applicability of religious literacy in a range of national and professional contexts. It offers an up-to-date critical review of thinking and empirical work on religious literacy from differing national settings. The first by Kersten von Bromssen and colleagues article in the issue offers a three country comparison of a discussion of religious literacy within the curriculum of Austria, Scotland and Sweden. It highlights both differences in understanding of the RE curriculum as well as differing characters of religious literacy. Martha Shaw's article in a timely way directly addresses the ways in which religious literacy might impact upon developments towards a religion and worldview curriculum by offering a model of 'religion and worldview literacy' as a way forward. Bruce Maxwell and Sivane Hirsch's piece

examines how the more contentious aspects of an Ethics and Religious Culture curriculum, such as that in Quebec, provide the opportunity for teachers to use their specialist knowledge of religion to improve pupils' religious literacy. Angelina Sanchez-Marti and colleagues examine Catalonia teacher-managers' attitudes towards inter-religious dialogue, while Anna Halahoff and colleagues use data from a survey of Australia's 'Generation X' to comment upon the level of their religious literacy, making recommendations about future curriculum development. Finally, on religious literacy in this issue, Patricia Hannam and her co-authors point to the political dimensions and potential of religious literacy in the UK context, inquiring whether religious literacy does, in fact, offer a way forward for religious education.

Disclosure statement

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