

# Religion Education, Intercultural Education and Human Rights: A Contribution for Cornelia Roux

Robert Jackson

R.Jackson@warwick.ac.uk

## Abstract

In this article, I draw on my own experience as a researcher, writer on theory and pedagogy of religion education<sup>1</sup> and contributor to European policy documents. This provides a basis to discuss some issues pertinent to Cornelia Roux's personal and professional journey as a researcher in religion education and related fields, including intercultural education, human rights education and citizenship education. I refer to our meetings over the years, both in and beyond South Africa, especially in the context of the International Network for Interreligious and Intercultural Education, and to the development of Professor Roux's ideas on Religion in Education (RiE), Religion and Education (RaE). An attempt is then made to articulate a view on the question of liberalism in relation to human rights, which connects to a stance on intercultural education and to religion education and values education more widely. The position developed is consistent with the approach to empirical research developed by Professor Roux and her team. The article concludes by relating Cornelia Roux's personal journey to some of the themes considered above.

**Keywords:** religion education, intercultural education, human rights, political liberalism, comprehensive liberalism, plurality, pluralism, identity formation

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term 'religion education' in this article, commonly used in South Africa, as an equivalent to 'non-confessional religious education', as used in the UK.

### **Cornelia Roux: A Memoir...**

I first met Cornelia Roux at a meeting of the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values held in Banff, Canada, in 1992 up in the Rocky Mountains where Alberta borders British Columbia. In addition to a packed seminar programme, there was a wonderful visit to the Columbia Icefield, and a trip in a huge Ice Explorer vehicle to the middle of the Athabasca Glacier. Cornelia and I sat together and, when we weren't taking in the wonders around us – including a walk on the glacier itself – we chatted about our work in our respective countries, hers based at the University of Stellenbosch, in the Western Cape and mine at the University of Warwick, in the English Midlands. Clearly, radical change was in process for South Africa, a country I had never visited, and which I still associated with the apartheid regime. Nelson Mandela had been released from prison in 1990, negotiations to end apartheid were under way, and two years after our meeting, in 1994, Mr Mandela was elected as President of South Africa.

It was in 1994 that I began to learn significantly more about South Africa and its education system, and the changes that were taking place following Nelson Mandela's election as President. My friend and colleague Professor Wolfram Weisse, based at the University of Hamburg but with close links to South Africa, set up the International Network for Interreligious and Intercultural Education (IRE) with the specific aim of promoting links between Southern African and Northern European research groups working in fields related to religion and education in culturally diverse democratic societies. I was privileged to be invited to the first meeting in Hamburg in September 1994, a session that was also attended by colleagues from the Institute for Comparative Religion in Southern Africa (ICRSA) based at the University of Cape Town: Janet Stonier, Nokuzola Mndende, Rashied Omar and Gordon Mitchell. Under the leadership of Professor David Chidester, this group had already produced a challenging report on policy options for religion in public education in South Africa (Chidester 1992). Professor Christo Lombard from the University of Namibia in Windhoek was also a participant, giving a distinctively Namibian perspective. European colleagues, in addition to Professor Weisse and myself, included Professor Trees Andree, from the Netherlands and Professor Barbara Schenk and Peter Schreiner from Germany. The occasion was a great learning experience for me, and I began to get a better sense of perspective concerning Cornelia

Roux's pioneering role at the University of Stellenbosch. Papers from the meeting were published in Weisse (1996). The group met again in 1996 at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands (Andree, Bakker and Schreiner 1997), and we had our first meeting in South Africa, at the University of Cape Town, in 1998, under the leadership of David Chidester (Chidester, Stonier & Tobler 1999). By this time, more colleagues had been added to the group from our various countries, with the addition of members from Norway. My colleagues and I in the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit hosted the next meeting at the University of Warwick in 2001, focusing on citizenship and religious education – a theme equally important to South Africans and Europeans – and including three South African contributions (Jackson 2003). Three years later, in March 2004, Cornelia Roux hosted the meeting of IRE at the University of Stellenbosch. This was a very rich event, concentrating on the contribution of religious education to intercultural education. The papers were published in a special issue of the South African peer reviewed journal *Scriptura*, with Cornelia Roux acting as Guest Editor. Papers addressed the theoretical underpinnings and concepts of intercultural education, elaborated new pedagogies and critical approaches to the subject, and reported empirical research (Roux 2005). The most recent meeting of IRE was in 2006 in Leeuwarden in the Netherlands, with a strong South African presence (including Cornelia Roux), and new colleagues from Malawi, Botswana and Zambia (ter Avest 2011). By the time of the publication of the Leeuwarden papers, Cornelia Roux had moved to be Professor and Research Director of the Focus Area of the Faculty of Education Sciences at Potchefstroom Campus of North-West University in South Africa. I have met Professor Roux at various times between these meetings, including at several conferences of the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values, the World Congress of the International Association of the History of Religions (Durban, August 2000) and the meeting of the Religious Education Association in Boston (November 2013), and we have visited each other's homes and families.

Recently, Cornelia Roux has written frankly about her own personal journey from being raised and educated in the context of apartheid and a form of white Christian nationalism, to working for a human rights-based form of religion education in a democratic South Africa (Roux 2012a). Her journey started as a student in segregated schools and universities for whites only and with Afrikaans as the only medium of instruction. She trained as a teacher in

a segregated university, with a behaviourist approach to teaching and learning. The narrowness of the curriculum and educational approach in an Afrikaans speaking university during the apartheid era was an issue for her, in contrast with some neighbouring universities with a more internationally oriented approach and an open opposition to apartheid. She also speaks of being exposed to the complexities of diversity during study visits abroad from the early 1980s, and of her interactions with colleagues in English-speaking universities in South Africa. Thus, Dr. Roux found herself re-evaluating her approach to teacher training and to religious studies as a discipline, leading to her involvement with various empirical research projects in schools as democracy in South Africa became established. It was clear that Christian National Education could not ‘meet the needs, realities and challenges of the multi-religious South African society’ (Roux 2012a:138). This led to the development of her hermeneutical ideas on Religion *in* Education (RiE), aiming to bridge the gap between curriculum development, subject knowledge and classroom practice in schools and teacher training programmes, and her approach to Religion *and* Education (RaE), with the goal of widening understanding of religion in public space in an interdisciplinary way, and with religion contributing to other fields such as citizenship, ethics, intercultural education and human rights education (e.g. du Preez & Roux 2010; Roux 2012a; 2012b).

## **Religion Education and Liberal Democracy**

The changes in South Africa have been particularly dramatic, and the ongoing challenges to educators and other professionals working to establish democratic processes and equal opportunities for all citizens are not easy. There was the initial move from the apartheid system to a democratically elected government, and then an on-going attempt to establish democratic procedures which acknowledge and incorporate a variety of different (and changing) cultural expressions and traditions, including attempts at re-thinking fields such as religion and citizenship education, drawing on various kinds of empirical research as a resource. Although change was especially dramatic in the distinctive South African case, some key generic issues (concerning the nature of ‘multicultural societies’ and the theory and didactics of ‘intercultural’ learning, for example) overlap with other modern liberal democracies that embrace cultural, and religious and secular, plurality.

Highly relevant to all of this are the issues of rights and freedoms of individuals within a democracy, and debates about the nature of plurality and pluralism; these have been highly relevant to the development of Cornelia Roux's work.

## **Human Rights**

My intention here is not to discuss the wide-ranging empirical and pedagogical research undertaken by Professor Roux, which can be read elsewhere, but to attempt to articulate a position in the debate on human rights that is supportive of her general approach to religion in/and education, including her methodology for action research.

The nature and status of human rights and their role as guiding principles within democratic societies is a matter of increasing debate, to the extent that it seems almost fashionable at the moment to attack the idea of human rights. Some critics point out the European Enlightenment/ post-Enlightenment pedigree of human rights. Rather than being universal, human rights values are relative to a particular time and context (e.g. MacIntyre 1981). Others go further, seeing human rights as just one set of values in competition with others, drawing attention to increasing attacks on human rights from conservative nationalist and religious forces, and to reliance on the *power* of liberal states to maintain a human rights perspective – human rights representing a form of imperialism in the guise of moralism (Hopgood 2013). Such critics sometimes also point to double standards within some liberal states, opting out of certain human rights values when it is expedient to do so; others attack the proliferation of 'rights', or the emphasis on rights rather than on duties or obligations.

There is some truth in all of these comments. *Of course*, 'human rights' appear from within a particular historical and cultural context and have a particular pedigree (Morsink 1999 is an excellent discussion of the origins, drafting and intentions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). This is equally true of national constitutions, such as that of the USA, which continue to form the basis of law. This does not negate their continuing relevance or moral force. The publication of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (United Nations 1948) was a direct *moral* response to the totalitarianism that threatened Europe during the Second World War, and which spawned the Holocaust, and a genuine

(although contested) attempt to articulate moral principles essential to the democratic process. However, as Morsink argues, the Universal Declaration is *both* rooted in a particular time and place *and* maintains enduring contemporary significance and value (Morsink 1999).

*Of course*, human rights (or at least some aspects of them) may be criticised or rejected by those who advocate certain rules or principles based on an external authority, such as a particular interpretation of scripture or tradition; the rejection of the idea of the individual person as an autonomous agent is one example. *Of course*, individuals and governments may abuse the very human rights that form the basis of their law and policy; they are wrong to do so. None of this negates the moral force of human rights in principle. *Of course*, rights can be over-emphasised and the duties or obligations associated with them played down (however, one should recall that Article 29 of the Universal Declaration deals with duties: 'Everyone has duties to the community ...').

## Comprehensive and Political Liberalism

Supporters of liberal democracy defend basic rights that protect the equal freedoms of individuals in society. By enforcing rights such as freedom of religion, thought, speech, association and political participation, liberal political practices enable individuals to pursue their own conceptions of the good life, rather than having any one such conception imposed on them by the state. But what justifies such a process? Is a justification something external to, or intrinsic to, the democratic process?

Some of the notable thinkers of the European Enlightenment took the former view. For example, John Locke justified the equality and independence of persons by appealing to an underlying *religious* foundation: God created human beings equal and independent, and that is why individual persons possess natural rights to life, liberty, health, and possessions. John Stuart Mill, in contrast, advanced a utilitarian argument for maximising human happiness as a justification for individual civil and political liberties. These are examples of *comprehensive liberalism* where individual rights are justified by appeal to wider philosophical or theological premises.

The debate about liberalism continues, with writers such as the political philosopher John Rawls making significant contributions. Rawls' later work rejected comprehensive liberalism and defended *political*

liberalism, regarding justice as ‘... fundamental political ideas *implicit in the public political culture of a democratic society*’ (Rawls 1993:223, my italics). Political liberalism applies to individuals in their public capacity as citizens, not in their private role as individuals having comprehensive ideas of the good.

Rawls’ justification for political liberalism is as follows. Liberal societies have a plurality of reasonable but irreconcilable comprehensive moral, religious and philosophical positions; this is ‘reasonable pluralism’. There is no way to gain public agreement that it is more reasonable to adopt one of these over any other. Those holding different comprehensive views (including some not valuing autonomy as an individual ideal) will need to focus on finding what Rawls calls an ‘overlapping consensus’. Overlapping consensus refers to how supporters of different comprehensive views, involving apparently inconsistent conceptions of justice or morality, can agree on particular principles that support a state’s basic social institutions. Groups are able to achieve consensus partly by avoiding disputes over fundamental justifications, such as those involving different religious or philosophical presuppositions.

Political liberalism rejects views denying basic liberal rights of citizens or refusing to tolerate conflicting comprehensive views, regarding them as ‘unreasonable’. Non-liberal conceptions are accepted provided they accept the overriding value of political autonomy, and therefore do not seek to *suppress* alternative views.

Rawls’ view is attractive, and workable up to a point. The limit lies with those in society who reject political liberalism itself. This point is made by Kok-Chor Tan, who argues that political liberalism cannot avoid appealing to comprehensive moral ideas in defending liberal rights against those who deny political liberalism (e.g. Tan 2000:53-4). However, Tan does not argue for a ‘strong’ comprehensive liberalism, which requires the liberal state to impose its moral judgements. Rather, Tan argues for what he calls ‘*weak comprehensive liberalism*’. Weak comprehensive liberalism enables the liberal state to *refrain* from acting on its judgement that, say, a particular minority cultural practice is unacceptable (59-60), but to *promote discussion and dialogue*, not to impose equality. For Tan the reality is that the state may use its means to persuade, encourage, support or criticise without forcing people to do as it says – except in extreme cases, involving, for example, coercion of vulnerable individuals within families and wider social groupings

by others; in such cases, state intervention is legitimate. At the level of social and political interaction within a society or wider grouping, basic human rights – as reflected, for example, in the articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – can provide a set of provisional moral principles, derived from reflecting on the idea of democracy itself, relevant to dialogue between those holding different views (for example about personal autonomy) within a liberal society. Rawls’ view of overlapping consensus remains relevant in this context.

## **Human Dignity**

One example of using human rights as provisional moral principles in dialogue with moral ideas derived from particular cultural sources relates to the idea of human dignity. Many critics of the universal imposition of Western liberal democracy and a Western formulation of human rights *do* accept the idea of the innate value of the human person – what the Universal Declaration calls ‘human dignity’. However, they express it differently from the Western view of the individual, autonomous person. Rather, they use moral concepts and practices from within their own cultural and religious traditions which support the idea of human dignity as being a necessary condition for a just society.

One version of this view points out the *relational* nature of individual identity in some cultures, in which persons are not considered as ‘self-contained units’ which can be defined in isolation from human relationships (Parekh 1994). This does not mean that there is no concern here with human dignity or a just social order. In a traditional Hindu family, for example, certain family members are expected to take on particular responsibilities by virtue of their particular position in the family (which could be as eldest son, or first cousin, for example). Thus, autonomy, as understood by some Westerners, is restricted by virtue of a person’s birth. This does not negate the idea of human dignity however.

## **Rights and Duties**

Another example concerns the relationship between human rights and duties. In terms of ‘dialogue’ with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is worth reviewing the Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities,



published by the InterAction Council (1997), an independent international organisation mobilizing the experience of a group of former heads of state or government, chaired by Helmut Schmidt. Here, the Western social and historical context of the Universal Declaration is recognised, and some attempt is made at an accommodation between ‘East’ and ‘West’.

... many societies have traditionally conceived of human relations in terms of obligations rather than rights. This is true, in general terms, for instance, for much of Eastern thought. While traditionally in the West, at least since the 17th Century age of enlightenment, the concepts of freedom and individuality have been emphasized, in the East, the notions of responsibility and community have prevailed. The fact that a Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drafted instead of a Universal Declaration of Human Duties undoubtedly reflects the philosophical and cultural background of the document’s drafters who, as is known, represented the Western powers who emerged victorious from the Second World War (<http://interactioncouncil.org/a-universal-declaration-of-human-responsibilities>; accessed 8 December 2013).

The document goes on to say:

Because rights and duties are inextricably linked, the idea of a human right only makes sense if we acknowledge the duty of all people to respect it. Regardless of a particular society’s values, human relations are universally based on the existence of both rights and duties.

Examples of responsibilities in relation to rights included in the Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities are worth consideration:

- If we have a right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, we also have the obligation to respect other’s thoughts or religious principles.
- If we have a right to be educated, then we have the obligation to learn as much as our capabilities allow us and, where possible, share our knowledge and experience with others.
- If we have a right to benefit from the earth’s bounty, then we have

the obligation to respect, care for and restore the earth and its natural resources.

## **Intercultural Education and Human Rights**

The above discussion is relevant to anyone working in the general field of intercultural education in a liberal democratic state. For example, the Council of Europe's work on intercultural education relates closely to its work on human rights education. However, the Council of Europe's idea of *intercultural* education would make no sense if there were no genuine dialogue between different culturally or religiously based positions on personal and social value, and no flexibility to accommodate difference within a democratic framework. The fact that the Council of Europe encourages and promotes such dialogue in its work in the broad intercultural field – including education about religions and non-religious convictions – attests to this flexibility (e.g. Council of Europe 2008a; 2008b; Jackson 2014a; and 2014b).

## **Plurality and Pluralism**

In the context of intercultural education, it is important to be able to unpack the complexities and dynamics of culture and cultural change, including interactions of individuals, which might reveal conflicting ideas *within* a cultural scene. Relevant to this discussion is a distinction made by the Norwegian scholar Geir Skeie between 'plurality' as a descriptive term and 'pluralism' as a normative term. Everyone, in some sense, lives in the context of plurality, but there are different views on pluralism (Skeie 2003). Skeie also makes the distinction between 'traditional plurality' and 'modern' or 'post-modern plurality'. The former is concerned with 'conventional' accounts of cultural diversity. The latter includes the plurality of modern societies in the sense of being fragmented, the growth of individualism, the privatization of religion and the influences of globalisation. Modern/post-modern plurality and traditional plurality are closely intertwined. This makes an impact on cultural change 'within' communities, partly shaped by intergenerational contest (e.g. Baumann 1996; 1999; Roux 2012c). In terms of religion, some people (including young people) who identify with a particular religious or cultural tradition may not adhere to all or even many of

its fundamental traditional tenets; others may draw on a variety of religious and humanistic sources in formulating their personal worldview. An important task for teachers (and it is also a feature of Roux's empirical research) is to facilitate critical discussion of 'cultural discourse' so students can examine their own and their peers' assumptions, and reflect upon their own identities.

## **Religion Education and Identity Formation**

The exploration of plurality involves examining the relationship between individuals' accounts of and questions about personal identity and wider issues of social identity and plurality. Such an integration of the personal and the social sees fields such as religion education, not as *defined by* a fixed body of knowledge (although the development of knowledge and understanding is a crucial ingredient), but as a series of existential and social debates in which students are encouraged to participate, with a personal stake related to their own developing sense of identity. Religion education's fundamental concerns in relation to existential and social questions and subject matter concerned with 'religions' distinguish the field from others, though the precise boundaries are open to on-going public debate, including discussion by young people in schools. Religion education thus has a distinct identity as a field of study, but relates to and can contribute to a range of other fields (Jackson 2004).

Wilna Meijer, a Dutch philosopher of education with a particular interest in religion, adds more insights concerning identity in relation to religion education, using Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self to develop a model of self-awareness. In this, the self is not fixed, but changes through experience. Self-awareness is a matter of interpretation, of telling a coherent life-story. Since self-aware people inevitably live with ambiguity, each individual's identity is always open to revision. Religion education is thus a conversational process in which students, whatever their family or cultural background, continuously interpret and reinterpret their own views in the light of their studies (Meijer 1995). Religion education thus requires skills of interpretation, criticism and dialogue as well as access to sources of information. Participation in the relevant debates links the social world and the individual, and is a condition for the kind of inter-religious and inter-cultural communication that is necessary for the proper functioning of plural democracies.

It is also important to be aware of situations where there may be ‘overlapping consensus’, including examples of practices which might command the respect of others in society, or even elicit wider social recognition (Jackson 2011). Of course, there also may be situations or issues in which a cultural value held by at least *some* ‘insiders’ might potentially clash with alternative positions held by other ‘insiders’ and with human rights principles (e.g. Nesbitt 2013).

The line taken by Cornelia Roux and her team is to use every opportunity for dialogue and communication in their research, for example in their project on ‘A Search for Caring and Safe Spaces’ (e.g. Roux 2012b; 2012c; de Wet *et al.* 2012). In dealing with sensitive issues of gender, sexuality and power, the research team elicited personal stories which could then be explored dialogically, in a sensitive climate of ‘safe space’. Female students and teachers from selected schools were helped to negotiate the meaning of religious and cultural practices. The aim was to establish ‘communities in conversation’ fostering dialogue between teachers, mothers and daughters in order to create safe space for reflection, which might lead to empowerment and change (Roux 2012b; 2012c). The research engagement shows a development from a ‘community in conversation’ to ‘community and dialogue’ to a ‘community of practice’ in order to create safe spaces ‘as a support for girls and young women to share their fears, sadness and joys on the religious and cultural practices, and on how to be empowered’. In this project, reflecting Skeie’s idea of modern/ postmodern plurality, Roux sees feminism ‘... as an example of a political phenomenon cutting across cultures; it is not just one culture being imperialistic about another’.

## **Conclusion**

I have attempted to link the development of a research career, which has coincided with dramatic political and social change in South Africa, and (in Meijer’s terms) shown a high degree of self awareness and personal change, to developments concerning human rights, intercultural education and religion education. This led to a brief discussion of the status of human rights codes – notably the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – in relation to the processes of liberal democracy. I reviewed some recent criticisms of the idea of human rights and, although agreeing that they had some force, did not accept that they relegated rights related to human dignity and personal

freedom to being just ‘another set of political beliefs’. While being sympathetic to John Rawls’ views on political liberalism as a democratic ideal, I concluded that some guiding democratic principles are needed as a reference point for discussion, and a counterweight to those who reject political liberalism itself. While recognising the context in which it was formulated (but seeing some parallels with our own time), I argued that the articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are of continuing relevance and value. Taking a position close to that of Tan’s idea of ‘weak comprehensive liberalism’, I presented human rights principles as a means to dialogue and debate with different, for example, cultural and religious groups, recognising the complexity of cultural change and development in relation to the interaction of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ plurality<sup>2</sup>. This position seems consistent with Cornelia Roux’s own use of human rights principles – in her action research, for example – in establishing dialogue within and between different cultural groups in the current South African context.

Finally, to return to Cornelia Roux’s story, in my observation three things stand out. The first is the determination and sheer hard work she has put into developing her ideas through a period of massive social and political change (including building a team of excellent colleagues and research students, and exemplified by university awards both for teaching and research). The second is her identification of research topics and methods – notably relating to human rights and gender – which address directly issues related to young people in a complex ‘multicultural’ democracy, especially during a stage of rapid transition. The third is her management of her *own* personal journey in the context of rapid social and political change within South Africa. That some others have been slow to change, resistant to interdisciplinary work – including some from education and religious studies – or simply have failed to appreciate the political, social and personal importance of well-informed religion education and intercultural education, has been a source of frustration for Cornelia Roux (2009). Thankfully, this has not impeded her own very positive efforts.

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<sup>2</sup> In this brief discussion it has not been possible, for reasons of space, to apply the ideas to particular issues such as the presence and role of faith-based schools within a democracy.

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Robert Jackson  
Professor of Religions and Education  
University of Warwick; and  
Special Adviser  
European Wergeland Centre  
Oslo  
R.Jackson@warwick.ac.uk