Edinburgh Research Explorer

Religious literacy

RELIGIOUS LITERACY: A WAY FORWARD FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION?
Patricia Hannam, Gert Biesta, Sean Whittle & David Aldridge

Abstract

In this paper the central findings of a research project into religious literacy are presented. This project sought to answer the question as to whether or not religious literacy can be a way forward for religious education (RE). Starting with the idea of 'literacy', dominant approaches religious literacy in the literature are examined. An educational argument is developed, building on a definition of literacy in relation as being an effective navigation of a domain. At this point a question is raised about whether domains should be accepted as they are, or whether education needs also to work with students on the ability to raise critical questions about how domains are defined and policed. This moves the discussion from functional literacy towards critical literacy; highlighting the political dimension of literacy. By way of conclusion we consider what all this means for RE, and whether or not religious literacy can offer a way forward for RE.

Keywords: literacy; religion; education; religious literacy; religious education (RE)

Introduction
Over recent decades there has been a growing interest in religious literacy in educational and broader social contexts. There are a number of strands to this, for example that at the general level educators remain committed to improving literacy and thanks to the arguments from Hirsch (see for example Hirsch 1987), the theme of *cultural* literacy has fuelled debates about what would be meant by *religious* literacy. If there are concerns about the levels of cultural and religious literacy across society, it becomes possible to argue that religious education (RE) in schools might have an important role to play in addressing this problem. Indeed, it raises the question of whether or not religious literacy might be the way forward for framing and justifying RE in the curriculum. The recently published *Final Report from the Commission on Religious Education* (CoRE 2018) draws attention to a lack of consensus over the aims of RE. Against this background it could be argued that religious literacy ought to be adopted as both the aim for RE and as an organising principle for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in this subject area.

This paper is based upon research commissioned by the Culham St Gabriel's Trust which sought to arrive at some tentative answers to what ought to be the place of religious literacy in RE. The main work undertaken was to gain clarity over the discussion about religious literacy, particularly in relation to discourses about literacy, and how it relates to RE as a curriculum subject. The method undertaken sought to combine theoretical enquiry with the insights of a wider research community and classroom practitioners. After collecting and reviewing literature on religious literacy a draft report was subjected to two rounds of consultation. The first was an invited panel of ten experts from the field of educational research and scholarship, including specialists from the field of religious education. The second was a panel of nine RE teachers from England. In the light of insights from this

consultation the report was composed and presented to Culham St Gabriels Trust. In this paper, emerging from the report, we argue that whilst religious literacy is an important idea, it would not be commendable to see it as the way forward for RE.

In what follows the main findings from the project are presented. Starting with a discussion of the more general idea of 'literacy,' we then zoom in on literature on religious literacy. In the third section an educational argument is developed, building on a definition of literacy as the ability to navigate a domain. The question we raise is whether domains should be accepted as they are, or whether education needs to go beyond simply navigating domains and work with students to raise critical questions about how domains are actually defined and policed. That would move it from functional literacy to critical literacy and would highlight the political dimension of literacy. In the fourth part we explore what this might mean for RE, leading to our explanation of why religious literacy is *not* the way forward for RE.

The idea of literacy

In recent decades literacy has become central to educational discourse, dominating policy initiatives and daily practices in education. Literacy is a complex concept which overlaps with a cluster of others, including 'literature', illiteracy, non-literary, non-literate. The word 'literacy' began to be used in the 1880s but has since then become almost ubiquitous in educational settings. The starting point for a contemporary definition of literacy is the ability to read, decode and comprehend written texts.

Pioneering works in the sociology of education tended to regard literacy as a process which involves acquiring autonomous functional skills. The ability to decode and comprehend written texts could be seen as having tangible positive consequences for society as a whole. Goody and Watt's (1963) article 'The Consequences of Literacy' presented a fundamental anthropological shift between 'talking humans' and 'writing humans.' Although they were not making a sharp distinction between 'uncivilised' primitive peoples and civilised literate ones, they described how becoming literate has a profound effect on society. This wider social consequence was a reflection of the positive consequences that literacy has for the individual. One of the striking features of the Reformation was the importance attached to being able to read the Bible for oneself which gave a major push to a focus on functional literacy, understood as the ability to gain access to written texts. Education thus became understood to have an important role to play in helping children and young people to gain this ability.

There has been ongoing reflection on what counts as literacy. In particular there is the increasing recognition that literacy is more than a cognitive skill and not only about decoding and processing information. This broader way of understanding literacy acknowledges that language is a social rather than an individual phenomenon, making it more appropriate to think of literacy as a social practice. This being the case, becoming literate is about becoming part of such social practices (Collins and Blot 2003) and is not autonomous, but deeply communal. Moreover, pupils ought to be recognised as not being blank slates. They bring literacy with them, and sometimes more than one literacy. Typically, this is an oral literacy but can include other literacies.

The so-called New Literacy Studies (Street 1997) began to characterise literacy in terms of 'multi-literacies.' This approach to literacy is more fluid in terms of what counts as a text and recognises ambiguities regarding who decides what is or is not useful. This shift in

stance amongst sociologists of education allowed for a richer insight into texts and the social practices in which they are embedded. The ability to participate in and be part of practices is not just about (written) texts, but also about literacies in other domains; hence the proliferation of literacies - financial literacy, numeracy as numerical literacy, environmental literacy, and so on – where religious literacy then quite easily can be added to the list.

In light of this shift in understanding, an important question emerged about whether it matters *what* one is able to read, decode or understand. Following from this, there is an intriguing parallel relationship between the emergence of compulsory schooling and public interest in illiteracy. This provides a helpful reminder that for most of human history people have engaged exclusively in oral literacy. Being able to engage in written literacy is, historically speaking, a much more recent phenomenon. In the not so distant past, being illiterate was not regarded as problem. However, over the past two centuries illiteracy has come to be regarded as a deficiency.

It is intriguing to speculate about what has brought about this shift from illiteracy being considered typical to now being viewed as problem. One answer might be the (probable) relationship between literacy and economics. If economic goals are better achieved through having a largely literate population, then illiteracy is an issue or problem that must be tackled in order to serve the economic aims of society. Another answer (hinted at by Collins and Blot 2003) is that the emergence of compulsory schooling has fed a growing anxiety over illiteracy.

There may well be a possible conflation between 'schooling' and 'literacy'. In common usage, being illiterate is now synonymous with having little or insufficient schooling. By the age of ten the vast majority of children in countries like the UK have achieved functional literacy. Due to the need to generate 'certification' and qualifications - and of course child care - compulsory school extends well beyond the age of ten. Perhaps illiteracy is only a problem against the context of compulsory schooling.

In more recent years a line of argument developed by E D Hirsch had put the emphasis on a need for cultural literacy, particularly understood in terms of 'knowing' (of propositionally defined schemas) and preceding 'skills' (of comprehending culture and the world). According to Hirsch, there are things you *need* to know (described as concepts but normally exemplified by Hirsch in terms of *vocabulary*) before you can find your way around in society. The claim that in order to have access to domains of disciplinary enquiry there are some conceptual 'basics' that you need to know, acquire or accept, has become part of the argument for the recent cognitive 'turn' in education.

It is therefore important to appreciate that literacy is a deeply political concept, having a number of strands. One is the idea of literacy as a human right, that is that to be lacking in literacy skills is to experience a deprivation that hinders human flourishing. Another strand is the relationship between schooling and literacy. One of the functions of schooling is to initiate children into the use of written language, in particular the ability to read, decode and interpret a range of texts in the preferred language of the polity. Having large proportions of society that are functionally literate has economic benefit. Literacy projects of the OECD and UNESCO are routinely justified in terms of the economic benefits of fostering literacy.

A further political strand is the way in which being schooled in literacy skills contributes to socialisation, identity and senses of belonging to the wider society (and nation-

state). In learning to read and write a given language, a connection with the wider socio-political context is fostered and promoted. Children come to school proficient in differing literacies but are quickly faced with the challenge of having to adopt a dominant written literacy; decisions about which written language and which texts are not primarily pedagogical issues, but political ones. Thus, questions about what text and content pupils 'ought' to be schooled in raise issues of power and control.

At this point we note that it is challenging to pin down the characteristics of literacy and literacies precisely because it is such a multi-layered concept. It is important to make distinctions between written and oral literacies on the one hand, and between functional literacy and ways in which literacy empowers or emancipates individuals and communities on the other. Observing this complexity sets the context for the next section, where we review ways in which *religious* literacy has been understood.

Religious literacy

The term 'religious literacy' has become widely used within contemporary discourse on RE. Just as 'literacy' is a relatively new term which has undergone significant changes in meaning, the same is true of 'religious literacy.' These days there is little, if anything, which is striking about coupling the terms 'religious' and 'literacy'. However, prior to the publication of Wright's *Religious Education in the Secondary school: Prospects for Religious Literacy* (Wright 1993) it is difficult to find any examples of advocates of RE using or referring to it. An early example of the phrase is found in a short article in the American journal *Religious Education* by Ward titled *The Right to Religious literacy* (Ward 1953). The following year the sociologist Vladimir de Lissovoy published an article on *A Sociological Approach to Religious literacy* (De Lissovoy 1954).

However, in less than three decades the term 'religious literacy' has become an integral part of numerous debates and analyses concerning religious education. Although Wright's work is highly influential, the emergence of 'religious literacy' as a central concept is not only due to the strength of his assessment of the challenges facing secondary school RE. A number of other factors have contributed both to the widespread use of the term and to the range of ways in which 'religious literacy' can be defined.

In the early 1990s in England and Wales, the educational focus was on implementing the National Curriculum (following the 1988 Education Reform Act), with its emphasis on the delivery of skills in functional literacy and basic numeracy as a shared priority for all subjects across the curriculum. Progress tests in English, Maths and Science had been introduced at pivotal points in a child's career through their school (at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16). For policy makers and teachers, the spotlight was firmly on literacy and ensuring progress in the core subjects in the curriculum. At the same time, developments in the sociology and politics of literacy had allowed 'literacy' to take on a richer set of meanings. The New Literacy Studies fostered the idea of multi-literacies and loosened the traditional meanings around literacy. Against this context, there was an intuitive appeal in referring to 'religious literacy' in the way Wright did.

In effect Wright framed his arguments about the need for 'critical RE' in terms of improving the prospects for religious literacy. According to Wright, the primary way to do something about the problem of low standards of religious literacy was to prioritise the place

of truth claims in religious belief. Wright argued that the decline in religious literacy was rooted in the collapse of traditional confessional arguments for RE; he found many of the stances subsequently taken by advocates for religious education to be flawed. He rejected the phenomenological approach and argues against a relativistic approach. As Hannam (2018, 45-46) explains: "Ultimately Wright is looking for a new approach to religious education that can weave back together divisions he sees opened up in the Enlightenment between reason and experience, placing this within a contemporary understanding of education in a liberal democracy." It is this project which is his primary focus, although the association with concerns about religious literacy serves as a useful platform from which to launch his critique of contemporary RE.

According to Wright, religious literacy is "the ability … to reflect, communicate and act in an informed, intelligent and sensitive manner towards the phenomenon of religion" (Wright 1993, 47). Central to 'critical RE' is Wright's contention that religious traditions make truth claims, with which children need to be educated to engage critically. Thus he argues that "the mark of a religiously educated child … would be his or her ability to think, act and communicate with insight and intelligence in the light of the diversity of religious truth claims that are the mark of contemporary culture" (Wright 1996, 175). Wright couches this in terms of bringing about a critical dialogue between the horizon of the child and the horizon of religion concerning the nature of transcendent reality (Wright 2000, 179). Thus, Critical RE would be pivotal in halting and reversing the decline in religious literacy.

In contrast to Wright's position on religious literacy, two other markedly different stances have emerged. The first, developed in the North American context by Prothero (2007) and Moore (2010), sees religious literacy as a subset of E D Hirsch's cultural literacy, albeit an important one. Prothero maintains that in the past Americans had very good levels of religious literacy, but in recent decades this has declined to an unacceptable level. Although the USA is a deeply religious country, he contends, Americans have little knowledge about religion, giving rise to an urgent need to deal with the very poor levels of religious literacy. His response, aimed at the general public, was *Religious literacy: What Every American needs to know – and doesn't,* in which he argued that due to the paucity of religious knowledge and understanding across American society, religious literacy is needed 'to help citizens participate fully in social, political and economic life in a nation and a world in which religion counts' (Prothero 2007, 15).

For Prothero, religious literacy is "the ability to understand and use the basic building blocks of religious traditions – their terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors, and narratives" (2007, 15). Religious literacy can, in Prothero's analysis, be broken down into further sub-divisions which include ritual literacy, confessional literacy and denominational literacy. In order to remedy the widespread religious illiteracy, dedicated courses must be introduced to public schools and university courses. A large section of Prothero's book stipulates the information about Christianity and other world religions that needs to be known and understood by Americans if they are to regain their religious literacy.

Prothero's analysis draws broadly on the argument developed by Hirsch (1987) who advocated the urgent need for cultural literacy. Contemporary schooling, for Hirsch, was disadvantaging children by failing to hand on the ability to understand culture. Prothero casts the spotlight on the specifically religious aspects of American culture. Others, like Moore,

have blended together aspects of cultural studies as a way of overcoming religious illiteracy. Moore defines religious literacy as entailing "the ability to discern and analyse the fundamental intersections of religion and social, political, cultural life through multiple lenses' (2010, 1).

She specifies the characteristics of a religiously literate person in terms of their understanding and ability in relation to religions: "1) 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 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place" (2010, 1) The emphasis is on understanding the ways in which religion is a fundamental and integral feature of human life. A person who is deficient in this knowledge and understanding could be considered religiously illiterate.

For Prothero and Moore there is a shared concern about the need to tackle the decline in religious literacy for the good of society. Given that religion is an inescapable feature of life, deeply woven into the shared history and cultural of a nation state like America, a basic level of religious literacy is something all citizens need. However, in a North American context this is controversial because the strict separation between state and Church in the American constitution has led to a curriculum in public schools devoid of any RE. Prothero's argument is that for the good of society it is essential that at school or university young people learn the key information that will make them at least minimally religiously literate

A second stance towards religious literacy is one developed by Dinham and colleagues. This is not about a general decline of knowledge, but starts from a more practical-contemporary observation, namely that in a multi-religious, multi-faith, multi-cultural, and post-secular society it is important that people have sufficient knowledge of religion in order to act and interact well. Religious literacy is important because it would appear that too many of us lack the ability to talk about religion in the public sphere, putting us at a severe disadvantage since religion is a central aspect of human life. The ability to recognise this fact, as well as to engage with it (whether it be in universities, schools or welfare provision), needs to be fostered and enhanced. Dinham maintains that there is "an urgent need to re-skill public professionals and citizens for the daily encounter with the full range of religious plurality" (Dinham 2015, 110). The strength of religious literacy as a concept is that it can be viewed as a framework for thinking through the implications and challenges of religions, beliefs and world views in different situations and real-life contexts. Religious literacy can be understood as "both generalizable and context-specific, exploring how it plays out in variety of public practices and settings in the real contemporary world" (Dinham and Francis 2015, 3). Dinham and Francis explain that "religious literacy resides, then, in an improved quality of conversation about the category of religion and religious belief itself, which first of all irons out all of the muddled binaries and assumptions" (14).

Dinham and colleagues operate with an intriguing understanding of religious literacy, not least because there is sensitivity to the fact that there are a range of alternate definitions for what it involves: "religious literacy, then is a stretchy, fluid concept that is variously configured and applied [and this] is very much how it should be; (…) religious literacy is necessarily a non-didactic idea that must be adapted as appropriate to specific environments"

(Dinham and Shaw 2015, 257). The framework of religious literacy is concerned with "seeking to inform intelligent, thoughtful and rooted approaches to religious faith that countervail unhelpful knee jerk reactions based on fear and stereotype" (266). Religion and belief are key parts of the lives of a majority of people around the world, and as such there is a shared need to be able to speak with others in a way which appreciates and recognises this.

Dinham, Shaw and Francis are making a sociological analysis. Religion, belief and faith are integral features of human life and culture and the way we engage with others, particularly in the public sphere, ought to be aware and respectful of this This analysis reflects the profound changes in the sociology of religion regarding the 'secularisation thesis.' Social theorists such as Bergin (1967) used to confidently and routinely predict the decline in religious observance and belief, particularly in Western or developed economies. These views have had to be heavily revised, not least because while there might have been a decline in subscription to institutional forms of religion, in the British context for example, there has been a marked growth in identification with informal religious or 'spiritual' beliefs and identities (see Davie 2015; Woodhead 2016).

In key aspects of public life there is a need to appreciate that a movement towards secularisation is not inevitable. Evidence for this can be found in various literature, for example in relation to the media (Wakelin and Spencer 2016) or social work (Crisp 2016) as well as classroom religious education (Conroy 2016). These and others reveal contemporary difficulty of engaging with the religious faith of many people within society. There can be a crude stereotyping of those living a religious life and failure to appreciate plurality within the same religious tradition. An example of this could be the tendency of classroom teachers to characterise 'true' religion as benign or pro-social (Smith, Pearce and Nixon 2018).

It follows that Dinham's position incorporates a criticism of the state of religious education in the UK. Unlike the USA, compulsory religious education has been mandated by government legislation since the 1944 Butler Education Act. Presumably in the UK the decline in religious literacy is not just a result of wider cultural and socio-political developments, but also of the kind of religious education that children are receiving. It is here that Wright's stance would chime with Dinham's analysis about the need for improved religious literacy in religious education.

Another line of criticism facing RE has come from Barnes' stark analysis (2006) that the nature of religion has been seriously misrepresented over many decades in British schools. The intention may well have been benign (to contribute to the social aims of education), but the result is that RE has attempted to promote tolerance by downplaying or deliberately ignoring the diversity and clear differences between and within religions. Instead of serving social cohesion, so Barnes argues, this kind of RE has failed to help young people gain the conceptual skills to be able to handle and respect difference. In addition to Barnes and Wright there are others who have raised deep concerns over the current approaches to RE, including Cooling (2004), Erricker (2010), Bowie (2018), and Hannam (2018). In the light of the contested nature of RE in the UK it is relatively easy to maintain, with Conroy (2016), that the decline in religious literacy is in large part down to what has been happening in this part of the curriculum.

By way of summary it is helpful to recap on the three approaches that can be taken towards religious literacy. Dinham and Hirsch both talk about what one needs to 'get on' and

'get by' in a multicultural world. One is rooted in a deficit model (individual knowledge) and the other in a sociological account: the world is changing, so literacy must change with it. Wright has elements of the social analysis (it is worth recalling that he wants to offer an account of what we need to get by in a contemporary liberal democracy) but differs in his avowedly *metaphysical* focus. The reason we have debates and dialogues about religion, for Wright, is because we have different accounts of the nature of transcendent reality. It is because the nature of transcendent reality matters, and we will order our lives in relation to our beliefs about it, that we should engage intelligently in these debates. This means that literacy at least in part entails the attempt to 'get right' one's beliefs about transcendent reality. It's not just about getting on and getting by with others, but about getting on and getting by in relation to whatever it is that really matters (see Wright 2007).

The term 'religious literacy' has emerged as a dominant theme in RE because it brings together two clusters of arguments. The first cluster concerns the aims and content of the subject. Here the question is whether it is possible to make religious literacy a primary goal of RE in order to ensure young people can navigate a world in which the religious other is an inevitable part of life. The second concerns arguments about justifying the place of RE in the curriculum as an entitlement that all must receive. As a defining part of being culturally literate, is religious literacy one of the core competencies that all children need to develop as part-and-parcel of their education and schooling?

An educational point

Having explored both the idea of literacy and the dominant ways in which religious literacy is handled within the literature, it is important to make an educational point. This point is premised on a definition of literacy which primarily characterises it as the ability to navigate a domain, and highlighting that this is empowering work as it gives people the ability to navigate particular domains effectively. It is important to note that we do not define the relevant domains of literacy here. It might be argued that religious literacy is about being able to navigate the domain of religion. What this involves could, for example, be about having intelligent, informed conversations; being able to recognise religious symbols and practices, and so on. However, behind all this lies a key question about what would fall under the idea of religion. Understanding literacy as ability to navigate a domain works as formal definition, precisely because it raises the question as to what the domain then actually is.

Thus religious literacy is not just about the ability to navigate a terrain or domain effectively – it is not just a skill – but also entails an awareness of what one is doing when navigating such a domain. Being literate is not just about the ability to 'do' but includes an understanding of what one is doing. Literacy thus entails a reflective stance with regard to the domain and one's ability to navigate it. In relation specifically to religious education, Aldridge (2015; 2018a; 2018b) has described the moment of understanding in non-propositional terms as one of orientation or comportment, in which a student is oriented towards or takes a stance on a subject matter.

Approaching the idea of literacy in terms of the metaphor of navigation helps to bring one of the key questions in the educational literature on literacy into view, which is the question who 'defines' the domain or terrain in which one is or becomes literate. To put it differently: it is one thing to be able to navigate a particular terrain or domain effectively, but

it is an entirely different question whether it is desirable to navigate such a domain. A historical example that highlights what is at stake here is the case of Rosa Parks who had no problem in understanding the message that white people could sit in the front section of the bus and coloured people had to sit in the back – and in that sense can be regarded as literate – but who objected to the particular way in which this 'domain' was defined.

This highlights the need to make a distinction between literacy education as empowerment – the ability, to use Freire's phrase, to 'read the world' – and literacy education as emancipation, where the question of who has the right to 'name the world' comes into play (on the distinction between empowerment and emancipation in relation to literacy and education, see Biesta 2012). The idea of *critical* literacy, as a purpose of education, seeks to express this dimension of literacy education, and provides a helpful opposition to the idea of *functional* literacy. If functional literacy is about the ability to navigate a particular domain effectively, critical literacy seeks to help students to raise questions about why the domain is what it is, who defines – or has the right to define – the rules, codes and boundaries of the domain. This, in turn, leads to the question of whether one should or shouldn't identify with the domain as it is, or should seek to change or redefine the domain. Here education shifts from socialisation to what can be termed 'subjectification' (Biesta 2009). Unlike socialisation, where one gains an identity within and in function of a particular semiotic or social domain, subjectification focuses on the question of how one takes a position in relation to the existing state of affairs.

With regard to the question of whether religious literacy can be a way forward for religious education it is, therefore, important to ponder the distinction between literacy education as empowerment (socialisation) and literacy education as emancipation (subjectification) and not to assume that there is only one 'modality' of literacy education. In the adult education literature this distinction is sometimes referred to as that between 'useful knowledge' and 'really useful knowledge' (Johnson 1979). A further question the emerges as to what the possible relationship between empowerment and emancipation as educational 'agendas' or ambitions might be. One rather popular view is to see them as sequential, which is, to argue that before one can be critical about something and take a stance towards it, one needs to know what one is critical *about*. In such a line of thinking socialisation is seen as a necessary (though not automatically a sufficient) *precondition* for emancipation.

At one level it makes sense to argue that one first needs to know the 'rules of the game' before one can raise critical questions about the rules and the game. Educationally, however, there is the question of the point at which the transition from 'domestication' to 'liberation' can take place and how this transition can actually be effected. This is captured in Immanuel Kant's formulation of what he termed the 'educational paradox,' which is the question of how, as educators, we can 'cultivate freedom through coercion.' This discussion is ongoing in the literature on education and emancipation (for an overview see Biesta 2017). For the discussion about religious education, all this raises the interesting question of the extent to which religious education can or should be a form of socialisation – a view which, quite quickly, may return us to the question of whether religious education should take a 'confessional' approach (not perhaps as recruitment into a particular faith tradition, but into a particular 'frame' through which religion might be viewed) – or can or should be a form of emancipation.

In this section we have raised the question of whether the domains, in this case in relation to religion, should just be accepted as they are, or whether education needs to go beyond this and also work with students on the ability to raise critical questions about how the domains are actually defined and policed. This is further complicated by the fact that religion is not just an object of study, not only a set of beliefs and practices, but a reality and way of existing in the world that makes a difference in people's lives (see Hannam 2018). Aldridge (2018) has described some part of what we are here calling 'domains' in terms alternatively of the academic disciplines that seek 'ownership' of the curriculum space of religious education, or of the particular 'frame' against which a curriculum object, reduction or exemplar is offered to the student.

The political dimension of literacy illuminates the difference between empowerment and emancipation or between useful knowledge and really useful knowledge from the field of adult education. It is the question of what students will do with their religious literacy once they have acquired it. Religious literacy ought to empower a student to go beyond the ability to decode and understand the meanings of religious practices and beliefs in order to take action over the social order implied in a given message about religion. The nature of the educational aim of subjectification is that the possibility for such action cannot be predetermined by the educator, but the history of academic debate around RE suggests the need to be constantly aware of the inevitable limitations of any possible way of 'framing' religion and allow for the possibility of future 'reframing'. Examples already touched on in the paper include the benign sanitising of religion's dark side (Smith, Pearse and Nixon 2018), the erasure, in the name of social cohesion, of significant differences within and between religious communities (Barnes 2006; Wright 2007), the side-lining of important questions of religious truth (Wright 2007), as well as the colonising framing of religion within the western academic tradition – as concerned with propositions and beliefs (Hannam 2018).

Conclusion: Religious literacy, a way forward for RE?
In returning to address the question guiding this paper we ask what all this means for RE. We wish to suggest that religious literacy should not be seen as the way forward for RE. The first reason for this is that 'useful' religious literacy, as the ability to navigate the complexities of modern multi-religious and multi-cultural societies well, is an important ambition for the whole of education, taking in a range of disciplinary approaches, and therefore just to see it as a task for RE would be to narrow the broader importance of religious literacy too much. The second reason is that although we do think that there is something important in functional religious literacy, it should not take over the 'agenda' for RE. This is because we consider that RE needs to 'work' on other educational dimensions as well. We are sure that 'useful' religious literacy is important in RE but that 'really useful' religious literacy is even more important. Critical religious literacy also brings the domains of literacy itself into question and operates across them, therefore it cannot be contained within the specific curriculum space of RE. Religious literacy then becomes a way forward for the whole of education, and would leave more curriculum space allocated to the educational exploration of religion in RE. The question as to where the boundaries should lie between religious literacy and RE are interesting in curriculum terms and our work here has opened up the need for further exploration of this point.

References

Aldridge, D. 2015. *A Hermeneutics of Religious Education.* London and New York: Bloomsbury.

Aldridge, D. 2018a. "Religious Education's Double Hermeneutic." *British Journal of Religious Education* 40(3): 245—256.

Aldridge D. 2018b. "Reading, Engagement and Higher Education." *Higher Education Research and Development* 38(1): 38—50.

Barnes P. 2006. "The Misrepresentation of Religion in Modern British Religious Education." *British Journal of Educational Studies* 54(4): 395—411.

Biesta, G. 2009. "Good Education in an Age of Measurement: On the Need to Reconnect with the Question of Purpose in Education." *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* 21(1): 33—46.

Biesta G. 2012. "Becoming World-Wise: An Educational Perspective on the Rhetorical Curriculum." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 44(6): 815-826. doi:10.1080/00220272.2012.730285.

Biesta, G. 2017. "Don't be Fooled by Ignorant Schoolmasters. On the Role of the Teacher in Emancipatory Education." *Policy Futures in Education* 15(1): 52—73.

Berger, P. L. 1967. *The Sacred Canopy*. Garden City: Doubleday.

Bowie, R. 2018. "We Reap what we Sew: Perpetuating Biblical Illiteracy in New English Religious Studies Exams and the Proof Text Binary Question." *British Journal of Religious Education* 40(3): 277—287.

Crisp, B. 2016. *Spirituality and Social Work*. London: Routledge.

Cooling, T. 2004. "Theology goes to School: The Story of the Staplefield Project." *Journal of Christian Education* 47(2): 85—98.

Collins J. and Blot R. 2003. *Literacy and Literacies.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

CoRE (Commission on Religious Education) (2018). *Final Report.* Available at https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/final-report-religion-and-worldviews-the-way-forward-a-national-plan-for-re/ (last accessed 24 January 2019)

Conroy, J. 2016. "Religious Education and Religious Literacy: A Professional Aspiration?" *British Journal of Religious Education* 38(2): 163—176.

Davie, G. 2015. *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox.* Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Dinham, A. 2015. Religious literacy and Welfare. In *Religious literacy in Policy and Practice*, edited by A. Dinham and M. Francis, 3-26. Bristol: Policy Press.

Dinham, A. 2015. Religious literacy: contesting an idea and practice. In *Religious literacy in Policy and Practice*, edited by A. Dinham and M. Francis, 101-112. Bristol: Policy Press.

De Lissovoy, V. 1954. "A Sociological Approach to Religious Literacy." *The Journal of Educational Sociology* 27(9): 419—424.

Dinham, A. & Shaw, M. 2015. *REforREal: The Future of Teaching and Learning about Religion and Belief* London: Goldsmiths University of London. Online. Available HTTP: <http://www.gold.ac.uk/media/goldsmiths/169-images/departments/research-units/faiths-unit/REforREal-web-b.pdf> (accessed 9 August 2016).

Erricker, C. 2010. *Religious Education: A Conceptual and Interdisciplinary Approach for Secondary Level.* Oxford: Routledge.

Goody J. and Watt, I. 1963. "The Consequences of Literacy." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5(3): 304—345.

Hannam, P. 2018. *Religious Education and the Public Sphere.* London: Routledge

Hirsch, E.D. 1987. *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know,* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Johnson, R. 1979. "Really Useful Knowledge: Radical Education and Working-class Culture." In *Working Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory,* edited by J. Clarke, C. Critcher and R. Johnson, 75—102. London: Hutchinson.

Moore, D.L. 2010. *American Academy of Religion Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States*. American Academy of Religion.

Prothero, S. 2007. *Religious literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – And Doesn't*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Smith, D., Pearce, J. and Nixon, G. 2018. "Bad Religion as False Religion: An Empirical Study of U.K. Religious Education Teachers' Essentialist Religious Discourse'." *Religions* 9(11): 361. doi:10.3390/rel9110361

Street, B. 1997. "The Implications of the 'New Literacy Studies' for Literacy Education." *English in Education* 31(3): 45—59.

Wakelin, M. and Spencer N. 2015. "Religious Literacy and the Media: The Case of the BBC" In *Religious literacy in Policy and Practice*, edited by A. Dinham and M. Francis, 227—236. Bristol: Policy Press.

Ward, L. 1953. "The Right to Religious literacy." *Religious Education* 48(6): 380—383

Woodhead, L. 2016. "The Rise of 'No Religion' in Britain: The Emergence of a New Cultural Majority. *Journal of the British Academy* 4: 245—261.

Wright, A. 1993. *Religious Education in the Secondary School: Prospects for Religious literacy*. Abingdon: David Fulton Publishers.

Wright, A. 1996. "Language and Experience in the Hermeneutics of Religious Understanding." *British Journal of Religious Education* 18(3): 166—180.

Wright, A. 2000. "The Spiritual Education Project: Cultivating Spiritual and Religious Literacy through a Critical Pedagogy of Religious Education." In *Pedagogies of Religious Education: Case Studies in the Research and Development of Good Pedagogic Practice in RE*, 107—187. Great Wakerings: McCrimmon.

Wright, A. 2007. *Critical Religious Education, Multiculturalism and the Pursuit of Truth.* Cardiff: University of Wales Press.