WHO'S AFRAID OF SECULARISATION? REFRAMING THE DEBATE BETWEEN GEARON AND JACKSON

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1. INTRODUCTION

As a doctoral student in religious studies, I was involved in teaching on two undergraduate modules, one for first year students called 'Understanding Religion,' and another for more advanced undergraduates called 'Death of God Theology'. Sensitive to the dangers of the colonisation of theology and religious studies by sociology of religion, I was struck that 'Understanding Religion' really amounted to secular and atheist explanations (both compelling but also rather reductive) of religion from figures such as Marx, Durkheim, Freud, and Frazer. By contrast, 'Death of God Theology' invited students to consider responses to cultural and religious changes from theologians like Bonhoeffer, Tillich, Rahner and Bultmann. This ((not really) ironic) reversal – that understanding religion was not about engaging with theologians, but with theories about religion, and that the death of God should be investigated through a theological lens – seemed to reflect the status of theology as a derivative science. It seemed that theology's place in the academy was colonised by secular theories about religion, theories that tended to address the outer shell of religion without getting to its heart. But it also suggested that the theological tradition was more diverse and complex, even self-subverting, than certain assumptions about the confessional nature of traditional university departments of theology or 'divinity' might suggest.

Is there something about religion that can only be understood phenomenologically, from an inwardness that secular theories are methodologically disposed to resist? From Ninian Smart to John Milbank, or Terence Copley to Marius Felderhof, philosophers of religion have long raised such questions about the positioning of religion within education. A similar question seems to animate Liam Gearon's concerns that the theological grounding of religious education has been carelessly excavated by secularised discourses of social theory, particularly in the guise of current geopolitics and pluralist religious education. Often framed around the insider/outsider problem of understanding religion (McCutcheon 1999), such concerns are not new, but their application to religious education is apposite.[1] As we shall see, Gearon's especially timely intervention (particularly since 2013) addresses what he calls the 'securitisation' of religious education, whereby the prevention of extremism is yet one more mission for the teacher of religious education. The contours of this debate are much older, reaching back to the age old debates about the autonomy of secular reason and the necessity for faith. John Milbank's initiation of the theological movement known as 'Radical Orthodoxy' with his provocative thesis in *Theology and Social Theory* (1992) was an important moment in recognising the ways that secular theories of religion have come to position theology, though, as Milbank himself argues at length, theologians have long claimed a distinctively theological space that resists reductive interpretations of religion in political, social, or cultural terms. In view of the provocations of Milbank, Gearon and others, the concerns of this article are wide, seeking to acknowledge again the secular framing of theology, but linking particularly with the sphere of education, more particularly that of religious education as a curriculum subject. There is a complex history and vast literature addressing religious education, to which I will refer only as necessary.[2] The debates between Gearon and Jackson are primarily concerning religious education, but the concerns raised therein speak to a far wider and more complex set of philosophical considerations. Firstly, I

will introduce Gearon and Jackson and the recent debate between them. This will require some discussion of the intentions behind religious education as a subject, and will involve wider debates that, since the emergence of a 'post-secular' turn in religious studies, lie behind those curriculum discussions.

2. INTRODUCING THE DEBATE

Robert Jackson and Liam Gearon are both prominent figures among the debates about religious education in the UK and beyond. Jackson was director of the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit from 1994 to 2012 and, since 2002, was a leading contributor to the Council of Europe's projects around religious and inter-cultural education, providing a key perspective for the development of the Toledo guiding principles on teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools (OSCE/ODIHR 2007). Jackson's ability to build bridges between policy, research and practice is clear, though perhaps coming at some cost, since the ability to achieve this kind of mutual understanding about the purposes and possibilities of religious education may entail significant practical conflicts and compromises. Gearon has been tracing the relations between religion, citizenship and education at least since 2002, though has taken up the questions of the securitisation and politicisation or religious education since around 2012. As Associate Professor of Education and Senior Research Fellow at Oxford University, Gearon has made significant contributions to these debates, though I will focus on his criticisms of the particular ways in which religious education as a curriculum subject in the UK and Europe has come to be framed and justified. In short, Gearon is critical of what he perceives as the secularised political framing of religious education, a framing which does not, in his view, help us to understand the phenomenon of religion on its own terms. Gearon suggests that one of the most important research projects on religious education of recent years illustrates this problematic framing of religion. He has in mind a 1.2 million Euro EU funded project known as REDCo (*Religion in Education. A contribution to dialogue or a factor of conflict in transforming societies of European Countries*),[3] which ran from 2006-2009 and involved the collaboration of nine European universities. The lead researcher and author for the REDCo project in the UK was Robert Jackson, who since 2015, has directly responded to Gearon's criticisms in thoughtful ways. In what follows, I draw attention to some of the insights contained on both sides of this debate along with developing some critical points that the debate itself presupposes.

Addressing the frequent proclamations of the resurgence of religion over recent years, Gearon is justified in asking, 'If God is back, on whose terms? His response is unequivocal: 'I contend that it is in terms of political and not religious discourse, for the former (in arguments over citizenship, democracy or human rights) predominantly frames the latter (2012, p. 153). In other words, religious education as it exists in the UK and across Europe, is primarily framed and justified by a secularized political discourse which does not help us understand the nature of religion on its own terms. Gearon is less explicit about why the political framing of religious discourse in education is necessarily problematic, or why the extension of secularization should be such a concern, tending to let the implications speak for themselves.[4] This might lead to misunderstanding, especially as many readers are likely to be schooled in the kind of secular social theories he wishes to keep distinct from theological discourse. It serves Gearon's purpose in developing the argument that this political framing of religion is interpreted as an extension of secularization, since through its connections with Rousseau, Durkheim and Bellah, the concept of 'civil religion' (a quasi-religious commitment to a state) illustrates Gearon's general argument. Jackson denies that this

criticism can be applied to the REDCo project (Jackson, 2011; 2015). Despite problems with Gearon's account, I am generally sympathetic with his concern that secularisation structures our understanding of religion in general and filters down through to our interpretations of the connections between religion and education. His more developed discussion of the secular framing of religious understanding by Ninian Smart and Williams James (Gearon 2013a, Chapter 5) provides some wider context for the more specific politicisation of religious education. Gearon is particularly concerned that the REDCo project is 'oriented towards civil religion and thus to political, secular, even (and though the empirical grounds of its effects are difficult to measure) secularising goals, whether such ends were intended or not' (Gearon 2012, p. 152). In assessing this debate between Gearon (2012; 2013a) and Jackson (2015) about the framing of religious education and its apparent social utility, I will try to expose key assumptions on both sides.

3. WHAT'S WRONG WITH TOLERANCE, RESPECT, AND HUMAN RIGHTS?

In understanding the ways that secularised discourses have structured the spaces of religious education, we turn to the principles of modern liberal governance, namely, tolerance, respect and human rights. It is perhaps not surprising that teachers of religious education are happy to present the subject as promoting tolerance, respect, human rights, citizenship, moral development and so on. After all, the subject (at least in much of the UK) has long been fragile, its place on the national curriculum being far from assured. The history of the subject in the UK mirrors many of the theological and philosophical tensions that religious and cultural pluralism seem to raise: namely, that in responding to ethnic diversity from the 1960's onwards, religious education has been regarded by some culturally conservative critics as complicit in eroding the shared national identity tied to a particular theological history (Parker and Freathy 2012). Beyond the utility of general political and social cohesion, religious education has more recently come to be justified in terms of security issues and geopolitics (Gearon 2013b). The fractured and polarised state of contemporary geopolitics requires us to seek ways to increase religious literacy and to prevent 'extremism' and 'radicalisation'. Surely an aim of religious education should be to contribute to religious literacy, even if recent research shows it has not been very successful in this aim (Conroy et al. 2013). The danger is, however, that these justifications for religious education are framed by a particular conception of the nature of religion. In short, religion comes to be positioned by the secular. The encounter between the different religious views, for instance, is predicated on a kind of dogmatic pluralism which tolerates religion as long as it remains within the individual private realm of conscience and makes minimal claims on public life. Here the exclusivism and absolutism of religious traditions must conform to the epistemic categories defined by pluralist philosophers of religion (Hick 2004). This ostensibly reasonable and inclusive framing of religion which places it in the private sphere, ensures that the political principles of tolerance and respect define how religion is understood. Tolerance and respect are presented here as political principles because of their cohesive utility, and so the political concerns to live peaceably trump religious ideas that often entail some kind of relation with transcendence. In this way, the religious education classroom tends to inculcate children and young people not into a particular religious tradition or theology, which, in post-confessional religious education (where religious education is no longer thought to declare and foster particular beliefs) has become distinctly suspect (Gearon 2013a, Chapter 5). Rather, children are inculcated into the presumption of pluralism - tolerance, respect, human rights – principles which reflect the secularised politicisation of our ultimate concerns. From this perspective, the construction of a liberal regime of truth eclipses the theological, and

silences serious theological engagement. One might say we are precisely educated *out* of being religious rather than into it because the real lesson here is that nothing ultimately is at stake since everyone's perspective is equally valid. Gearon sees in this a clear alignment of the pedagogical and the political: 'the *pedagogical* imperative of multi-faith teaching to address Europe's religious pluralism is also a *political* imperative to address the needs of peaceful democratic coexistence amidst religious pluralism' (Gearon 2012, p. 156, author's emphasis). The result is that 'within two generations Europe has transformed close to two millennia of Christian identity into a plural, multi-faith orientation in its religious education systems' (Gearon 2012, p. 156).

Apart from raising questions about relatively recent European identity being so straightforwardly aligned with a singular Christian identity, one could ask Gearon, so what? If religious education finds its purpose in helping communities understand one another and get along, then that might be cause for celebration, particularly in such fractured times. Jackson responds to Gearon's criticisms by replying that they are predicated on an essentialist view of religion that compels an unrealistically hygienic separation between politics and religion. The epistemic problem of the 'fuzzy-edges' of religious practices and identities that Jackson's REDCo project seems methodologically attached to, may prove unacceptable to the well-defined and rigorous authority of religions as institutional bodies (Gearon 2013a, p. 131). But whether religious identities can be firmly fixed or must remain porous and open-ended, one cannot avoid questions of hermeneutics, nor dismiss the possibility that deconstruction or even mystification have an important place within religious institutions. Gearon might, for instance, complain that John Hick's religious pluralism encourages a relativistic or postmodern negation of the meaning of religion (Gearon identifies Hick's position as a theology that mirrors political liberalism (Gearon 2013a, p. 134)), but Hick need not be interpreted as a relativist in these terms. In any case, if religious education has been reduced to politics, it is not clear what, if anything, has been lost or excluded. Gearon's invocations of T. S, Eliot and Friedrich Schleiermacher (Gearon 2013a, pp. 26-28), for example, seem to speak to those disposed to accept his theological presuppositions (which seem to assume a Christian theological orientation). The general structure of Gearon's argument is reminiscent of the criticisms of the deistic 'reduction' of the gospel to morality that some commentators accuse, for example, Leo Tolstoy of (Christoyannopoulos, 2016). But one might equally interpret the more inclusive liberal theology as another chapter in the history of theological innovation. That said, Gearon's argument about the reduction of religion to the political is both plausible and of concern if we are interested in understanding religions on their own terms. But I detect a deeper problem of reductionism, one that Gearon does not explore.

In what follows I will argue that there is a subtler framing of this debate between Gearon and Jackson, namely that religion is assumed to be about commitments to a set of beliefs, propositional truth claims, or worldviews. The propositional framing of religion has wide influence among those interested in the places of religion in education, including the religious education classroom. It can be detected within many debates about indoctrination, or competing rights between children, parents, religious communities, and nation states, where religious identity is assumed to be about a commitment to a set of beliefs or truth claims, resulting in an opposition between those who see religious identity as entailing an absolute commitment (Wright 2004), and those who accommodate more pluralist conceptions of religious identity. Although the propositional framing of religion has been critically discussed (Williams 2012; Smith 1962; Smith 1987; I'Anson and Jasper 2011) it continues to go largely unexamined among debates across religion and education (REMOVED). This

narrowed perspective of religious identity leads to an overly rationalised and voluntaristic conception of religious subjectivity, which is subsequently interpreted in terms of a subject who makes decisions concerning faith (Brown 2013). This propositional framing tends to elide important dimensions of religion: the intrinsic aesthetics of religious life, or the way practices are undertaken without a clear metaphysical or theological basis. In general, this obscures what might be broadly termed an aesthetic or hermeneutic view of religion. Some might be inclined to associate this with the liberal theology that responded to the Enlightenment, though I would suggest these hermeneutic and aesthetic approaches are part of an older tradition, a discussion that is beyond the scope of this article. An aesthetic framing of religious identity would foreground a range of practices, experiences, and sensibilities that do not presume an exclusive or absolute commitment. The Hindu who worships Christ, Buddha, Krishna, and other local deities offers an image of religious inclusion that sidesteps many of the problems of indoctrination, or of competing truth claims.

In what follows I will suggest some connections between this propositional framing of religion and how the debate between Gearon and Jackson addresses the influence of secularism. To some extent the propositional framing is itself a product of an Enlightenment 'rationalist' view of what it means to be human, and therefore also religious, though perhaps its roots are better traced back to Protestant voluntarism. I would argue, then, that a more thoroughgoing analysis of the influence of secularism upon religious education might identify this propositional framing of religion as further evidence of the influence of the secular.[5] So, although Gearon might have more to gain from the argument that a propositional reduction of religious life is partly a result of a secular framing of religion, neither Gearon nor Jackson seem concerned to question the idea that religion is about believing certain things or adopting a religious worldview. Before we develop the implications of the propositional framing of the debate there are some other important dimensions to Gearon's analysis to consider.

4. COUNTER-SECULARISATION OR THE POST-SECULAR?

Gearon challenges the core conjecture within recent trends in European religious education 'that the predominant political interest in religion within education is evidence of *counter*-secularisation' (2012, p. 151). The term counter-secularisation is an unfortunate one, seeming to derive from Peter Berger's influential but broad use of the term (Berger 1999). But it suggests something like an intentional reversal of secularizing forces, akin to what Rowan Williams has critically referred to as a 'restorationist religiosity' (Williams 2012, p. 22). The resurgence of religiosity across China, India, the US, Russia and so on (all of which are putatively secular states), can hardly be presented as a coherent reversal of the forces of secularization. Each nation and culture has very particular circumstances with respect to secularizing forces, and their impact upon education.[6] It is important to note, here, that *secularization* refers to a set of historical processes aligned with Weber's celebrated concept of disenchantment, a concept too often assumed to be linear as culminating in a 'secular' state. Painting with an inevitably broad brush, Gearon seems concerned to acknowledge the important point that secularization is not a linear process and there are plenty of accounts that seek to complicate overly simplistic linear secularization theses. It is odd, therefore, that Gearon sees the need to polarize what appears to be a secularization argument against his use of the term *counter*-secularisation. A brief examination of the secular will help to explain why counter-secularisation is such a misleading term.

In contrast to the notion of a historical and progressive secularization, secularism (to say nothing of the post- or counter-secular) properly understood is opposed not to religion but only state sanctioned religiosity, and so should not be conflated with irreligion or atheism. It is a political doctrine that opposes the political authority of religion (Blair 2010, p. 23; Sullivan 2012, p. 185; Williams 2012, chapter 2). This might sound like a straightforward idea until we look at examples of secular states. Perhaps French *laïcité* provides the clearest implementation of this political arrangement. But as James Arthur has argued, the French model is a long way from a consistent separation of Church and State (Arthur et al. 2010, p. 16).[7] Compare also the laïcité of modern Turkey, where religious influence on public life seems to be in the ascendant as the limits of the secular reveal itself and the Muslim majority express their view that religion has a public face. So there are important distinctions between secularism as a political doctrine, the secular as an epistemic category, and the historical process or secularization in which as societies 'progress' and modernize, religion loses its cultural and social significance (Casanova 2009). With this in mind it is worth examining how Gearon employs the term.

Gearon quotes the REDCo project leader Wolfram Weisse who states:

> In most European countries, we have assumed for a long time that increasing secularisation would lead to a gradual retreat of religion from public space. This tendency has reversed itself in the course of the past decade as religion has returned to public attention (Gearon 2012, p. 151).

Jackson (2015, p. 347) is correct to point out that Weisse is not saying here that current practices within European religious education present 'decisive evidence of counter-secularisation' as Gearon claims. Jackson points out that Weisse never actually uses the term *counter-secularisation*, using rather 'post-secularism' and even then, only occasionally. It is problematic that Gearon here relies on a binary between secularisation and its counter. The problem is, that secularisation has so many resonances and layers, that any argument that calls attention to its reversal is going to run into problems. This is why the 'post-secular' is a better term because it does not deny, counter or reverse the secular, rather the post-secular complicates the secular (just as the postmodern complicates rather than reverses the modern). Gearon's argument that the political frames the religious is worth developing, but does not need to posit an extension or reversal of an essentialised secularism. The REDCo project might reinforce certain 'secularising' assumptions about the nature of religion, but whether this is a problem or an innovation depends upon one's theological orientation. There is a big difference, for example, between what Rowan Williams characterises as the programmatic secularism that excludes religions from public life *tout court,* and a more inclusive procedural secularism in which religious and non-religious perspectives make equal contributions to public life without any particular contribution enjoying a privileged position. In this procedural form, many religious figures would agree with Williams that secularism 'must not be allowed to fail' (2012, p. 11), since the secular is designed to protect religion as much as the state. These political forms of the secular are quite different from the secular as epistemic category (see Asad 2003, p. 1), or indeed as a historical process. So, what exactly is the problem of religious education extending the *political* doctrine that establishes the space for a secularised encounter with religion? A secular (but not quite neutral) view of religious life may not offer a fulsome phenomenology of religion that 'real' religious understanding involves (but when does schooling ever succeed in bringing students to a fulsome phenomenology of anything?!). There are clearly important political dimensions to religion

that must be understood, now more than ever, and the post-secular offers an opportunity to excavate some of the layers of meaning with which religion has been loaded.

So the post-secular might be best interpreted as some kind of complication of the secular, a 'crisis of faith' within secularism itself (Habermas 2008), or 'disenchantment with the very idea of disenchantment' (Vattimo 2003, p. 30). The post-secular is 'not secular, nor is it exactly religious, or non-religious - certainly not in the familiar ways we have been accustomed to understand these terms' (Ergas 2015). The many forms of the (post-)secular (for they resist definition) help us to recognize the layered nature of religious (and non-religious) experience, understanding, and identity and their inextricability from politics, culture, and history.[8] In his rejoinder to Gearon, Jackson does not draw on the important resources implied in this complexity around the (post)-secular. But clearly the idea that a conception of religion unsullied by any cultural or political influence would require such a stringent and exclusive essentialism that I wonder if Gearon would have to acknowledge that his account is rather idealistic. Perhaps Gearon could have been more careful in developing the case that religious education has been usurped by a political discourse that reduces religion to political and social issues of tolerance, citizenship, human rights and so on. But as robust and comprehensive as Jackson's rejoinder to Gearon appears to be, it misses the fundamental point that Gearon is getting at, a point that is more general than his criticisms of REDCo implies.[9] Jackson is justifiably critical of aspects of Gearon's assessment of REDCo, but the substantial concern of the politicisation and securitisation of education remains a problem for understanding religion.

My main argument is that the debate between Jackson and Gearon (along with much that is written around both religious education in the curriculum, as well as broader discussions around the relations between religion and education) is itself framed by other hidden assumptions about the nature of religion, and so the social theory lens by which religion is interpreted, is itself derivative of a particular 'ontology' of religion, a reductive conception of what is means to be religious. Gearon's analysis too strongly asserts the intrinsic nature of religious education, and overdraws the distinction between understanding religion itself and sociological analysis of religion. We have already noted that this leads Jackson to charge Gearon with theological essentialism. I suggest one way of challenging (or deconstructing) this charge: by showing that religions are less constituted by beliefs or worldviews in a straightforward sense, which will shift ideas around tolerance, respect and (competing) rights. The framing of religion in political terms may itself be derivative of a propositional framing of religion in terms of beliefs and worldviews. This is because the very notion that religious education must entail a particular form of pluralism, takes for granted that there are plural belief systems that are essentially different. It assumes that people stand for, or identify themselves as holding particular beliefs or doctrinal positions which are in tension and contradiction with other views. At the sharp end, these different belief systems are regarded in exclusivist and absolutist terms, being both inviolable and irreconcilable. In political terms this appears to thrust upon us an unpalatable choice between some kind of theocracy or secularism. Gearon, along with others (Wright 2004, Barnes 2006), does not wish to erode the central meaning of religious life: that something true, or real is at stake. A commitment to a kind of bland pluralism is in danger of eroding the meaning of religion itself. Barnes and Wright take this further with their view that religious difference is not the *problem* of religious understanding, but its *presupposition*, because religious identities are what they are through the absolute claims that they make.

5. PLURALISM OR CONFLICT?

Pluralism, from the outset, appears to be based on certain presuppositions about the nature of religious truth that frame religious education as an activity that is fundamentally compromised. The compromise is that the acknowledgement of many truths is the erosion of the lived experience of a commitment to truth as such. As soon as different religious perspectives come together, one either accepts pluralism or endures conflict. This is the logic of what has been called the 'propositional frame' when applied to religion in education (REMOVED 2016, Chapter 3). The enlightened objectivity of social theories precludes the existential commitment of the religious subject, replacing the absolutism with pluralism or relativism. Surely to understand another religious perspective requires not only that we suspend our own religious beliefs (as phenomenologists of religion like Ninian Smart have suggested), but that we more radically suspend the judgment that assumes this is just one truth among many (Barnes 2006). But if we do try to accept the truth claims made by religious subjects, then, the inevitable outcome will be conflict. Does Gearon not have to defend his commitment to religious essentialism from the charge that it leads to inevitable conflict?

Gearon claims that secularised religious education is looking for the common ground that people share, and therefore will not be in a position to explore and emphasise the differences that matter. This is surely a danger for the practices of religious education but is questionable both theoretically and empirically. Theoretically, secularised political religious education should be in a position to emphasise religious difference more effectively than confessional religious education because those differences do not need to have implications for public life. From this perspective, difference does not necessarily lead to conflict, as Gearon suggests (Gearon 2013, p. 133) but its existence is, in fact, an argument for secular religious education. Moreover, the need for respect for plurality does not need to involve an impossible epistemic compromise, but might rather offer a practical option. It is a mistake to regard the praxis of religious education in which many people of various religious affiliations sit alongside one another as indicating an inevitable epistemic compromise or failure. The problems arise when we take religion to be primarily about commitment to propositional beliefs and worldviews. Looking at the empirical case, Jackson offers a good deal of evidence to counter Gearon's claims that the political paradigm filters out conflict. Drawing on cases from England, Russia, Norway, Germany, and Estonia, Jackson argues that,

> an examination of actual REDCo research reports, related to students, teachers and classroom interaction studies, shows that, rather than avoiding issues of conflict in relation to religion, they have much to reveal about students' experience, and about how conflict can be managed and used constructively in the classroom (Jackson 2015, p. 350)

Having just argued for a secular religious education that embraces difference, I have to complicate matters by acknowledging that the secular is by no means a neutral space. Indeed, there are reasons to suppose that contemporary formations of the secular privilege certain groups. William Connolly puts it as follows 'secularism is not merely the division between public and private realms that allows religious diversity to flourish in the latter. It can itself be a carrier of harsh exclusions. And it secretes a new definition of "religion" that conceals some of its most problematic practices from itself' (Connolly 2006, p. 75). To this extent, I appreciate Gearon's concern about the secular formation of politicised religious education

which seems motivated by the new definition of religion that the liberal polity imposes. But my preference has been to appeal to the complex *post-secular* over counter-secularisation.

6. THE HISTORICAL-POLITICAL PARADIGM

Jackson suggests that the wide range of researchers employed by REDCo from diverse academic disciplines refutes Gearon's suggestion of a prevailing theological outlook derived from a particular secularising political paradigm (Jackson 2015, p. 350). But in this response Jackson seems to underestimate the extent to which social theory permeates our interpretations of religious phenomena in ways that *precede* the explicit theorising undertaken by the REDCo team. In other words, a variety of religious perspectives might conceal a hegemonic framing of religion by the secular. To illustrate the significance of the unseen forces that structure our (secular) interpretations of the world, consider Charles Taylor's influential conception of secularism. Taylor points out that the real significance of secularism is not the containment of belief to the private sphere (secularity 1) or the decline in belief itself (secularity 2), but a shift in the conditions of belief which have made unbelief viable (secularity 3). Those changing conditions are visible only by way of their effects, by what they make possible (i.e. unbelief) and form the real substance of his analysis (Taylor 2007). Taylor's account directs attention to what structures our interpretations of religion (and education) requiring us to consider the conception of religion (and education) as such. Another approach involves a more fundamental hermeneutics of religious education to expose those implicit structures that 'always already' frame the debate (Aldridge 2015). Gearon's discussion of paradigms might also benefit from more explicit analysis of the implicit. It is perhaps a justifiable speculation to suggest that researchers engaged in quantitative and qualitative empirical research as part of the REDCo project are more likely to draw on sociological interpretations than theological methodologies, such as hermeneutics. This speculation that empirical researchers and social theorists have a theoretical grounding which is intrinsically secularising might be a step too far, but at least illustrates what is meant by the implicit framing of religious education.

As a student of Ninian Smart, Gearon is bound to be aware of Smart's multi-dimensional phenomenology of religion (Gearon 2013a, p. 112). Yet Gearon's conception of religion, at least with respect to the question of belief, is fairly conventional. To show how religion once mattered to people, Gearon quotes the venerable Bede who recounts an Anglo-Saxon king who 'used to sit alone for hours at a time, earnestly debating with himself what he ought to do and what religion he should follow' (Bede quoted by Gearon 2013a, p. 1). Religion is presented as a doctrinal issue or a question of decision, and a decision for one is a decision against something else. This exclusivist view of religion is associated with the role of religious education in schools of a religious character which, for Gearon, have the advantage that they begin from the starting point of faith (Gearon 2013a, p. 143). By contrast, state sponsored education proceeds on the basis of reason, and that defines the Enlightenment project's conception of religious education: that religion must be critically examined by reason. The problem with the opposition of faith and reason within religious education is that it leaves the fundamental cognitivist and propositional account of religion itself unexamined.

7. UNDERSTANDING RELIGION

I have attempted to show that Gearon's concerns about the politicisation and securitisation of religious education reflect deeper framings of the place of religion within education. This has meant that the discussion which began within the established debates around religious education as a curriculum subject, need to move to more marginal inquiries about the ontology and epistemology that underpin and shape those curriculum debates. I have discussed the framing of the debate, but have drawn also on other theorists who work is, in that sense, on the margins, hence the discussion of Taylor's analysis of the conditions of belief (Taylor 2007). Whether one regards this as marginal depends, of course, on deeper philosophical commitments. This question could be approached ontologically, as Heidegger spent his entire career doing, or by way of deconstruction as Derrida showed, or even through a Wittgensteinian reference to that which can be shown beyond 'saying'. Here the margins of ontological inquiry become the central issues at stake. We might, therefore, invoke a theology after Heidegger's critique of onto-theology, a Derridean religion without religion, or a Wittgensteinian silence. The references here to Heidegger, Derrida, and Wittgenstein are evocative of a concern with language as a foundational issue of religious identity. A key argument of this article concerns the assumptions about religious identity: that religions are not primarily about propositional truth claims, and debates between religious perspectives do not start with the propositional expression of internal commitments. Therefore, concerns about indoctrination or competing rights and claims among plural positions, often miss the point of the place of religion in education. To develop this argument further, I would like to blur the faith/reason belief/unbelief boundaries by showing how language in religion has important performative aspects. I do not have space to fully develop this and the associated critique of voluntarism, but it's reliance on a Western Protestant conception of religious identity should be noted.[10] The discussion could, therefore, move in a more philosophical direction by arguing that the problems in religious education are significantly attributable to assumptions around religious language. So, I will only briefly address the performative nature of religious and theological language to indicate the 'ontological' direction that the Gearon/Jackson debate might move to.

If religious statements are not directly propositional, is it better to call them 'performative', statements that perform particular actions, often through significant symbolic interaction? The performative aspects of theological language are witnessed in Frederick Copleston's claim that for Aquinas, religious language is often concerned to awaken reverence, rather than transmit information. More recently Jean-Luc Marion has made similar arguments about Augustine, that in the *Confessions* 'Augustine does not so much speak *of* God as he speaks *to* God' (Marion 2012, p. 9). The basic message here is that the texts, creeds, prayers and doctrines can be seen as spiritual exercises and practices rather than truth claims. The tensions between kerygmatic and apologetic theology, the longstanding debates between science and religion, and the revival of reductive (literalist and fundamentalist) theologies that are witnessed in the contemporary geo-political landscape, have encouraged a more propositional account of theological language that must be brought into question.

Moreover, each religious tradition seems to operate within its own discursive logic, within, its own language game. In his attempt to establish conviviality among different religions, Anri Morimoto says,

> An often-quoted Hindu phrase has it right: The absolute Brahman is "the One without the Second." The object of their devotion comes to the very first, not in comparison with the second or the third, not in a relative sense, but in the absolute sense. Saying

> "my God is supreme," therefore, does not necessarily mean that other ways are "secondary," let alone "mistaken" or "defective." Other ways are simply irrelevant to the person speaking. They constitute different language games which he or she has no ready access to evaluate. The believer gives total devotion to his or her own way, and it is beyond the person's concern whether or not there are other ways for other people to be saved. Inexorably existential and personal, all it means is: "as far as I am concerned, I was saved by this God, and therefore I give thanks to this God" (Morimoto 2005, p. 180).

For Morimoto, not only is religious language performative, but each language game is, in a certain sense, incommensurable, playing by its own rules. It is an aesthetic performance, an expression, and a devotion. The association of the poststructural performative language theory with medieval theology orients us to the soteriological concern of religious discourse that supercedes (without negating) the metaphysical interest. In other words, theologians are concerned less with the coherence and meaning that might be established through more or less correct representations of things (worldly or divine), than with a remedy or healing of our relation to God and the world. This account offers perhaps a rather limited conception of metaphysics, but the soteriological emphasis brings us to what the discourse is *doing* rather than *saying*. We might similarly ask what the statement of the creed does, as what it says. There are dangers here that a binary is established, that saying is read only in performative terms, as though the putative representational 'content' has no bearing whatsoever; that doctrines stand for nothing; that texts lose any stability and so forth. I have no desire to replace a tyranny of the rationalist and propositional reduction with the total denial of any form of stable content, or a claim that understanding should not be reductive. Representation and its correlate reductions are, particularly in the realm of pedagogy, essential though never final.

8. CONCLUSION

Perhaps the real question in the context of the Gearon/Jackson debate is whether the soteriological intention of liberal politics, to live peaceably together, is sufficient for religious education. Possibly Jackson and Gearon would agree that this is one dimension without being sufficient. Even so, does it need a theological consummation? Are there *cracks in the secular* rendering this political intention always ideological? Or is political ideology itself just a secularization of idolatry? Gearon's provocation about the creep of secularisation is worth paying attention to. But, despite his criticisms of the putative counter-secularisation of REDCo, he seems intent on countering the secular rather than engaging with its complications. For Gearon, religious life seems to be oriented to action in this world 'only insofar as action here ensures salvation, this life in other words in preparation for the judgement, punishment and rewards of the next' (Gearon 2013a, p. 176), and he seems ambivalent about whether religious education should be similarly oriented. It may be that the act of attention within the very particular classrooms of religious education across Europe and the world, are the places where the performance of the political and the theological are found alongside one another, without distinction or reduction.

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[1] The insider/outsider problem has particular provenance within religious studies and anthropology. Space does not permit me to consider the question in more detail but I must note that Gearon's references to debates around whether an outsider can understand a religious worldview seem predicated on an unhelpful dichotomy between those who are inside or outside that itself derives from a secularised conception of religious identity (Taylor 2007). In a certain sense, we are all outsiders, insiders, and transgressors, but the comfortable fiction of those within and those left out persists.

[2] The literature addressing the history and significance of religious education as a curriculum subject in the British context is vast. Freathy and Parker provide a comprehensive and recent account that addresses many of the issues raised in this article, particularly the influences of secularism and humanism on the formation of religious education in Britain in an increasingly liberal and democratic society (Freathy and Parker 2013).

[3] For an overview of the REDCo project, see https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ces/research/wreru/research/completed/redco/

[4] Jackson presents his own explanation: 'Religious education, according to Gearon, by its very nature involves some form of initiation into 'the religious life'; the various examples he gives relate to initiation into the Christian life' (Jackson 2015, p. 352).

[5] The influence of secularism on religion in schools has been subject to critical discussion from authors such as Terence Copley (2005), Trevor Cooling (2010) and Marius Felderhof (2012) but these discussions tend not to unpick the framing of religion itself, which I am attempting to begin here.

[6] A good example is to be found in the Irish Republic where I recently discussed the question of post-secularism in relation to education. The initial response from the audience was to point out that since 93% of schools in the Republic are controlled by the Catholic church, talk of the 'post-secular' was premature without first establishing the secular.

[7] Arthur shows how France's *laïceté* is not as thoroughgoing across educational institutions as one might imagine: 'there are nearly 9,000 Catholic schools in France, many enjoying government subsidy to educate two million children. One in three French children, at some stage in their school career, are admitted as students to Catholic schools. Indeed, the church controls 95 per cent of all private schools in France and is prepared to compromise with the state in order to ensure its continued existence as a provider of Catholic education (Judge 2002). A number of public schools have Catholic chaplains and religious education can be offered on a voluntary basis in some public schools (the Loi Debré of 1959)' (Arthur et. Al. 2010, p. 16).

[8] Many political philosophers regard the post-secular as reflecting a general skepticism towards Western neocolonial tendencies, inviting a reassessment of the founding myths and assumptions of the Western-led international order of the present geopolitical economy (Christoyannopolous 2014).

[9] It should be noted that Jackson is careful to delineate the particular scope of his rejoinder. 'The main purpose of the present article is not to deny that there are issues about the nature or aims of religious education – in relation to social, political and security concerns, among others – but to point out Gearon's misrepresentation of both REDCo and the Toledo Guiding Principles' (Jackson 2015, p. 346).

[10] As Wendy Brown puts it 'The conceit of religion as a matter of individual choice…is already a distinct (and distinctly Protestant) way of conceiving religion, one that is woefully inapt for Islam and, I might add, Judaism, which is why neither comports easily with the privatized individual religious subject presumed by the formulations of religion freedom and tolerance governing Euro-Atlantic modernity' (Brown 2013, p. 17).