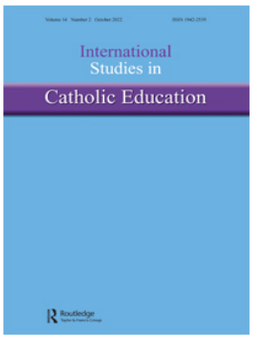

International Studies in Catholic Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rice20

# Faith, reason and religious education: an essay for teachers of religions in a sceptical age

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**To cite this article:** Richard Pring (2021): Faith, reason and religious education: an essay for teachers of religions in a sceptical age, International Studies in Catholic Education, DOI: 10.1080/19422539.2021.1942684

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2021.1942684

*International Studies in Catholic Education*, 2021
https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2021.1942684



# Faith, reason and religious education: an essay for teachers of religions in a sceptical age

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The following paper gives an abbreviated account of the argument in the recent book 'Challenges for Religious Education: is there a disconnection between faith and reason?' In paying particular attention to the perceived opposition between the systematic development of religious faith, on the one hand, and, on the other, the central educational aim of developing the rational basis of knowledge – especially within a more secular culture – so the book (and therefore this paper) identifies major challenges to be met by religious education in schools. Those are explicitly identified in the penultimate chapter of the book and briefly summarised in the final section of this paper.

**Keywords:** Faith; reason; religious education; sceptical age

## Introduction

The last few years have seen a crisis in religious education in schools especially in England but also more widely. That crisis might be summarised briefly as the transition from the time when it was assumed in daily practice that England and Wales were Christian countries, identified as such not only by generally held beliefs but also by practices which reflected those beliefs. Thus it was enshrined within the 1944 Education Act that it was legally binding on all schools that there should be a daily assembly of a religious nature – an assembly at which (most often) prayers would be said, passages from scripture read out, and a short homily given. The Spens Report of 1938, which preceded the Act, stated that

> We believe that there is a wide and genuine recognition of the value and importance of religious instruction and teaching of Scripture in schools and that the time is favourable for a fresh consideration of the place that they should occupy in the education of boys and girls of secondary school age. (Spens Report, 1938, Chapter 5)

The Report continued by asserting that

> No boy or girl can be counted as properly educated unless he or she has been made aware of the fact of the existence of *a religious interpretation of life*. (Spens Report, 1938, Chapter 5)

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'Religious interpretation of life' is printed above in italics by this author to highlight the fact that religious education was considered to be more than knowing about religion (key facts, etc.). Rather would an 'interpretation of life' indicate seeing life from the inside of a distinctively religious perspective, at that time a Christian one, even if, after full consideration, one were to feel unable to be committed to it. To 'see life from the inside' requires more than awareness (even an accurate and extensive awareness) of the central theological beliefs and arguments. It requires, too, an appreciation of the devotions and feelings arising from such beliefs.

There were, however, growing doubts as to the educational validity of such policy and practice. Should schools be initiating young people into an especially religious interpretation of life, particularly when the rational basis for such an interpretation was being increasingly questioned? After all, education should be concerned with the initiation of young people into ways of thinking and appreciating which could be shown to meet rational criteria (what might be referred to as 'forms of knowledge'), and to have met the requirements of scholarship and argument embedded within such forms. Perhaps the growing objection was most powerfully and influentially put in 1965 by Professor Paul Hirst of the Institute of Education, University of London:

> There has already emerged in our society a view of education, a concept of education, which makes the whole idea of Christian education a kind of nonsense, and the search for a Christian approach to, or philosophy of, education, a huge mistake. (Hirst, 1965)

Hirst's severe criticism (indeed, disparagement) of Christian education as an initiation into 'a religious interpretation of life' emerged from his view that to educate is to introduce learners to those well attested 'forms of knowledge' through which we come to understand the physical and social worlds which we all inhabit. Such forms of knowledge can be expressed in logically distinctive kinds of truth-claim, based on the relevant evidence. However, so he argued, religious beliefs are not so based on well attested truth-claims. No evidence can justify the conclusions about the existence of a God, let alone about that God's nature. The assertion of such religious beliefs have the outward appearance of such truth-claims, but they cannot withstand critical appraisal. Put bluntly, far from being true, they are meaningless, except as expressions of feeling and belief.

The status of Religious Education, therefore, has diminished, and frequently is no longer taught. A quarter of England's secondary schools do not offer Religious Education, according to the Report of the National Association of Teachers (as reported on BBC, 17th September, 2017). Where it is taught, it is often limited to teaching facts about different Religions as features of the social and political worlds in which we live. Questions concerning the truth of such religious beliefs are not a significant aspect.

There has been felt, therefore, the need to reconsider the nature of Religious Studies in schools – to find a solution which might reconcile the different perspectives. Therefore, in 2016 there was established for England and Wales a Commission on Religious Education (CORE, 2017) to provide a thorough review of the subject to be studied up to the age of 16 'to prepare pupils for modern life in Britain'. Its main recommendation was that the subject should be renamed as 'Religion and World Views', and would attach equal importance to the understanding of humanism, secularism, atheism and agnosticism.

**Crucial issue: role of reason and truth in faith formation**

Following the philosophical criticism of the truth status of Religious Education in schools, and following the embrace of such criticism especially within the humanist lobby, and given the general indifference to a religious form of life within an increasingly secular society, the continuation of Religious Education as the introduction to, and formation in, a particular interpretation of life rests upon whether or not such beliefs can be held, and indeed promoted, as 'reasonable' – that is, that they do withstand the tests of truth which are crucial for all forms of knowledge and can be taught accordingly. If they cannot, then to teach them and to initiate young people into a religious form of life would be to indoctrinate them – surely the unmistakable 'mortal sin' of the educational enterprise.

***Beginnings of 'faith formation'***

To pursue this question, it is important, first, to clarify what it means for someone to 'have a faith' – to think and live within a system of beliefs which, in their explanatory power, transcend the material world which is open to sense experience and which is the focus of scientific explanation. Second, given that such an understanding of 'having a faith' (whether that be Christian Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, and so on) is intelligible, we need to ask how the tenets of such faith can be justified so that it makes sense to follow them. The assumption in so having a faith is that the underlying claims are true – that they correspond to some underlying reality. But if so, they surely need to show how such claims to truth (bereft of the empirical evidence by which scientific claims are verified) can be justified. Perhaps the position is best summed up by Keith Ward (2015, 23) thus.

> This argument for God, therefore, points us in a certain direction – in the direction of greater and greater understanding. But it points to something beyond our experience, an idea which we cannot really grasp. And this is just where the argument becomes more than merely abstract (like some purely academic exercise), because it is in fact an exercise in the training of a vision, in pointing our minds to a reality just 'beyond' our understanding, but in the direction of greater, not less, understanding.

First, then, 'having a faith' would imply a belief in a reality which transcends (both in its description and in its explanatory power) the world which is transparent to the senses – that is, the observable experiential world which is studied and explained within the empirical sciences. To the sceptic, such a claim to belief would be seen to be nonsensical. But the believer would point to the many manifestations of such transcendence and its entry into the human consciousness.

Such 'varieties of religious experience' are revealed in detail by William James (1902) who reminds us that

> the whole array of our instances leads to a conclusion something like this: it is as if in the human consciousness a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call 'something there', more deep and more general than any of the special and particular senses by which the current psychology supposes existent reality to be originally revealed.

The philosopher Emile Pascal (1670, 427) wrote of 'the reasons of the heart' – an interpretive and phenomenological account of the whole of human experience, the

becoming aware of a Being, who transcends the experience of the senses as such and who has

> hidden Himself from direct human knowledge. Indeed, the very name He gives Himself in Scripture is *Deus Absconditus*

As Bernard Lonergan (1957, 48) explained in his 'study of human understanding', *Insight:*

> The possibility of transcendent knowledge is the possibility of grasping intelligently and affirming reasonably a transcendental being.

This is reflected in so much detail given by Rudolph Otto ([1923] 1958) in his influential book *The Idea of the Holy,* where he endeavours to articulate this sense of what he refers to as the 'numinous' or 'the holy' as a category of interpretation peculiar to religious writing and practice. In so doing, Otto draws attention to much music and poetry, for example, in Gerard Manley Hopkins', *God's Grandeur*:

> The world is charged with the wonder of God
> It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.

And Otto quotes John Ruskin

> Lastly although there was no definite religious sentiment mingled with it, there was continual perception of sanctity in the whole of nature, from the slightest thing to the vastest, an instinctive awe, mixed with delight, an indefinable thrill, such as we imagine to indicate the presence of a disembodied spirit.

Many are the cases of the deeply spiritual and aesthetic experience, identified by James, Otto, Pascal, Wordsworth and others, not only in the territory of Western Christianity but also through the Judaic prophesies of the Old Testament and within the Islamic traditions.

### *Reasonableness of such faith formation*

However, as John Henry Newman asked in his *A Grammar of Assent* ([1870] 1955), how can religious belief so described be justified, given that the evidence for its conclusions seem so inadequate to the degree of commitment?

The difficulty would seem to lie in the limited understanding of what is seen to be 'reasonable', namely, that which focuses philosophically upon the relation between what is observed and what is concluded through evidence within the empirical world – most thoroughly in the world of the physical sciences. But such a limited understanding of reasonableness would exclude, for example, all moral judgement and argument as, by definition, 'unreasonable', which, therefore, as demanded by the philosopher David Hume (1748, 12, part III), should 'be committed to the flames for it can contain nothing but sophistry'. Indeed, much of what is regarded as reasonable discussion and deliberation would be cast out as mere sophistry, including the philosophical arguments which define what is reasonable. The fifth century philosopher, Boethius, in *The Consolations of Philosophy*, referred to philosophy as 'the lady handmaiden of theology', the continuing reflection on what one believes, tentatively or otherwise,

criticising and clarifying faith claims from whatever sources – aesthetic, speculative or philosophical. It is a question of what St. Anselm declared to be *fides quaerens intellectum*, and such *fides* might begin with the kinds of thought and feeling as expressed in William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience,* but developed through critical engagement with others' experience and reflections upon them, or through acquaintance with their articulation in religious liturgies.

Such critical engagement may not add up to 'proof' in the strict sense of that word, but nor do many 'rational' arguments as they seek evidence for conclusions reached, such evidence leading to belief and confirming it, yet always open to development in the face of yet further and possibly contradictory evidence. 'Evidence' does not *entail* correct conclusions, let alone 'certainty' (an issue to be considered in the 'challenges for religious education') but it becomes stronger when seemingly confirmed by other strands of evidence. As Pascal said, 'it is our heart that senses God, not our reason', and thus 'we know the truth, not only by reason, but also by the heart'. Therefore, to quote Anthony Kenny (1992, 8), it is a question of

> whether the evidence for the existence of God is sufficient to *warrant* the degree of assent characteristic of the believer. (*this author's italics*)

Religious faiths, therefore, generally emerge through long traditions of such thought and criticism into which future generations are initiated. The Catholic Church, for example, has developed doctrinally through centuries of conversation, argument and scholarship, as embedded in and sustained by the regular Ecumenical Councils of the Church, beginning with those of Nicea (325) and Contantinople (381), and thereafter.

Furthermore, that tradition of 'reasonableness', and its challenge to the narrower forms through which faith traditions are criticised and rejected, has evolved philosophically – rooted in the classical traditions of the ancient Greek philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, and thereby in subsequent developments through the early Christian philosophies of St. Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas. The scholastic tradition, in particular, emerging from Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* and *Summa Contra Gentiles* of the thirteenth century, remains central to the critique of the anti-religious attacks (emerging through what is referred to as the *Enlightenment* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) of the Empiricists, on the one hand (for example, Locke, Berkeley and Hume), and of the Idealists, on the other (for example, Descartes or Hegel). Drawing much on the work of Aristotle, that scholastic tradition maintained and developed the arguments that made sense to move logically from experience of the 'sensible world' to a transcendental account of that world in the creative power of a God. (See Pring 2020 for an account of the Scholastic and Thomist tradition preserved in the articulation of Catholic belief from the thirteenth century to the present day).

One needs of course to distinguish between, on the one hand, reasons leading to belief in there being a God (as reflected in William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* or in Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* or in Pascal's *Reasons of the Heart*) and, on the other hand, reaching a deeper understanding of the nature of that God as the object of worship. As Aquinas argued, knowledge of God consists in knowing *that* He is, but not in knowing *what* He is. In this Aquinas was but repeating the sentiments of St. Augustine in his *Sermons*, namely, *si comprehendis, non est Deus* ('if you understand, it is not God'.) Or again, in the words of the eighteenth century John of Damascus who wrote

> It is plain, then, that there is a God. But what he is in his essence and nature is absolutely incomprehensible and unknowable. (quoted in Harries, 2002, 143)

Such knowledge *about* God is necessarily imperfect but, as articulated by Aquinas, we can approach such understanding through analogical reasoning, and of course through revelation, but always subject to the clarification and critique afforded by philosophy.

### *A living faith*

However, in facing the challenges to religious education, there is a danger in focusing exclusively on the issues of proof, of evidence and of reasonableness, for, as Richard Swinburne (1981) warns, a purely propositional account of faith (that is, 'one believes that … ') fails to capture the *way of life* which embodies those beliefs, so inadequately expressed propositionally. One believes practically and gains greater insight through practical participation in a way of life into which one has been introduced – manifest in such practices as making the sign of the cross or genuflecting before the Blessed Sacrament. Such practices implicitly embody beliefs and understandings which gradually become more explicit as they are practised. Accordingly, Swinburne (p.91) quotes Pascal, where the believer helps the unbeliever by suggesting he 'acts as if'.

> You want to be cured of unbelief and you ask for the remedy; learn from those who were once bound like you … . They behaved just as if they did believe, taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. That will make you believe quite naturally.

Just as a way of living in a purely secular context and culture embodies a distinctive way of understanding the world (bereft of religious significance), which usually goes unexamined, so equally a way of living within a religiously charged context and culture encapsulates the possibility of experience being understood and appreciated in a different way, opened up to contrasting explanatory accounts and understandings of experience. Thus religious education is much more than the grasp of propositional knowledge. It requires insight into a distinctive way of life which, however, because it can be partly expressed propositionally, is opened to the critiques and clarifications afforded by philosophy. Part of such critique will inevitably address what would be seen as the inadequacy of prevailing secular appreciation of the universe and of experience, specially where such secularisation has become home to a 'New Atheism', as reflected in several recent publications such as Harris (2004), *The End of Faith*: *religion, terror, and the future of reason*; Dawkins (2006), *The God Delusion*; and Hitchins (2007), *God is not Great*, which is dramatically subtitled 'how religion poisons everything'.

Hence, it is not surprising that so many renowned scientists and philosophers of science do not see a complete opposition between a purely scientific understanding of reasonableness, leading to the apparent nonsense of belief in God. Rather do they appreciate the validity of different forms of reason, including those which, as identified by Aristotle and Aquinas, enable people to move from the world of sensible experience to what is referred to a 'transcendental account' and explanation of events in the world, especially as Kepler the mathematician declared

> The chief aim of all explanations of the world would be to discover the rational order which has been imposed upon it by God, and which He revealed to us in the language of mathematics. (*quoted in* Lennox 2009, 8)

Such arguments from 'design or final causality' sit alongside those from 'efficient causality' within the long and critical tradition from the ancient Greek philosophers through its increasing sophistication within the Thomist and Neo-Scholastic tradition to the present day, challenging the positivist assumptions of the atheistic and agnostic critics of the meaningfulness of theological claims to knowledge.

***Interim summary***

A summary, therefore, to the puzzle of how one can relate to God, who seems beyond the normal requirements of 'reasonableness', might be:

- an understanding arising from attempts to prove God's existence (as within, for example, the Aristotelian and Neo-Scholastic tradition referred to above);
- revelation through God's self-disclosure as in the testimony of the prophets, or in the life of Jesus as reported in the New Testament, or in the revelations to Mohammad;
- participation in a spiritual way of life (manifest, for example, in religious practices and liturgy) which embodies an historically and critically evolved form of life.

**Phenomenological account of religious knowledge and understanding**

Reference has been made to that powerful sense of the religious dimension reflected in the work of William James, Otto, Pascal and others, often as the starting point of more systematic reflection and speculation. There is a consciousness of what Otto referred to as the 'numinous', and of what is referred to above by William James as the 'varieties of religious experience'. Such consciousness is commonly referred to as the 'phenomenological awareness' which underlies religious claims, transcending specific religious beliefs and opens up the mind to religious faith and discourse. As Gearon (2014, 100) shows, phenomenology

> would provide the grounds for a 'neutral' study of religion … . A highly suitable approach for those socio-political and educational contexts which confront religious plurality.

Indeed, such 'phenomenological consciousness' has been the object both of philosophical attention and educational application.

With reference to the former, for example, one might refer to the influential work of the nineteenth century philosopher Brentano (1874). This distinguishes between the act of consciousness itself (the psychic phenomenon) and the object which one is conscious of but which is given meaning through the subjective activity of the mind shaped by its *a priori* structure (following the influence of Kant's exposition of the conditions of rational thought and indeed of the necessary postulate of moral obligation, as argued in *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*), and by previous ideas, emotions and purposes. The philosophical tradition and influence of 'phenomenological consciousness' was promulgated in Britain through the *Journal*

*of British Society of Phenomenology* (reflected in Husserl's 1927 contribution), and through the powerful influence of Heidegger who, in *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1927), argued that western philosophy had forgotten the superior 'Being' in the hierarchy of things – thereby appealing to a more ontological account of reality than prevailed in the contemporary philosophical scene.

With reference to the educational application of such 'phenomenological consciousness', religious education was significantly affected by the writings of Ninian Smart whose book *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion* (Smart 1968), demonstrated how the 'interpretive approach', inspired by the phenomenology, could raise or enhance the religious consciousness without commitment to a distinctive religious doctrine or tradition – a mode of religious education appropriate for a secular culture and society. Thereby religion could be taught, not so much as a distinctive form of knowledge or as an initiation into a distinctive religious tradition, but rather as a 'phenomenon' of cultural interest which might well lead to its exploration as a form of knowledge. This was expressed thus by Jean Holm 1975, in *Teaching Religion in Schools.*

> The common denominator of all religions was that religion has always been an important *phenomenon* (this author's italics) of human experience, expressed as a need to make sense of the world, to affirm that there is a purpose not of human making, that the structure of reality is something that human beings belong to rather than something that belongs to them (*quoted in* Copley 2008, 110)

As Jack Priestley (1992), within the same phenomenological tradition confirmed,

> The great purpose of education should be to give people greater reliance on the validity of their own inward and private experience.

Hence, there was developed (especially inspired by the educational work of Ninian Smart and within the distinctive phenomenological tradition which prevailed particularly within the continent of Europe) a recognition of the basis of religious belief in a 'consciousness' of a religious interpretation of life and, thereby. the serious considerations of the truth or falsity of the underlying beliefs of such consciousness.

Clearly part of such consciousness would be, to quote Carr (1996),

> via the engagement of young people with some serious tradition of spiritual reflection or enquiry through which they might come to appreciate the nature of genuine spiritual concerns and questions – as well as something of what past masters of a tradition may have accomplished in trying to address such concerns.

**In a secular age and coping with doubt**

Reference has been made to the cultural context in which the practice of, and thus initiation into, a religious form of life with its distinctive claims to 'reasonableness' are to be conducted. That context, often hostile to religious practice and in particular to the teaching of Religions in schools, is referred to as 'secular'. At one but highly influential level, the secular culture was expressed by the German philosopher, Neitzsche ([1882] 1996), in terms of 'the death of God'.

> Where has God gone? I will tell you. We have killed him – you and I! We are all his murderers. But how have we done it? … Who gave us the sponge to rub out the entire

> horizon? What were we doing when we unchained the earth from the sun? … Where are we going? … God is dead. God is still dead. We killed him. How are we going to cheer ourselves up, the worst of murderers?

Nietzsche thus shows a radically different cultural context in which we are to understand the world and in particular the significance of human beings within it. They are now freed from the moral constraints of religion, totally autonomous persons, each deciding freely on the life worth living. The 'horizons of significance', as Charles Taylor (2007) expressed it, become vastly different. Such a shift in 'horizons' would include the following – though they inevitably overlap.

- ***Withdrawal of reference to God in public and moral life***

Such was quite explicit in the case of state schools in France following the arguments of Emile Durkheim in his book *Moral Education* (Durkheim, 1961), wherein he argued for a purely secular education wherein there would be no reference within the public sphere to God or religion in the formulation of educational aims and thus in the formation of young people. In Britain, one sees the increasing attack upon the maintenance of publicly funded faith-schools. As Taylor (2007, 2) summarises the situation:

> As we function within various spheres of activity – economic, political, cultural, educational, professional, recreational – the norms and principles we follow, the deliberations we engage in, generally do not refer to God or to any religious beliefs; the considerations we act on are internal to the 'rationality' of each sphere.

- ***Decline in religious practice***

The figures are revealing. According to the British Social Attitudes Survey (2018), 1916, compared with figures from 1983, those identifying themselves as Christian declined from 66% to 38%, those claiming no religion rose from 31% to 52%, the number of Britons identifying themselves as Church of England dropped from 40% to 14%, but amongst adults under 24 that number is now no higher than 2%. Those claiming to be Catholic reduced from 10% to 7%. The majority of the population say that they have no religion.

- ***Religious commitment in need of justification***

Where religious belief and practice do prevail (regular church-going, devotions of various kinds and the saying of prayers), they are seen increasingly to be odd, in need of justification – especially in a social atmosphere of general indifference. Religious commitment warrants explanation whereas its absence does not. And those in schools who are from practising religious families may well be less ready to speak out about such a faith or invoke its moral authority in discussions about controversial social and moral issues (concerned, for example, with sexual morals).

- ***Enlightenment and the growth of 'modernism'***

There is inevitably a philosophical background to such a growth of the secular culture arising from the persistent influence of the Enlightenment. Such is

characterised, certainly in Britain, by the growth of the empiricist tradition reflected in the work and influence of John Locke, Bishop Berkeley and David Hume, according to which there can be no knowledge other than what can be demonstrated through observation of the material world – a form of positivism well illustrated in the twentieth century by A.J. Ayer for whom any claims to knowledge of God must therefore be dismissed as meaningless. On the Continent, the 'critical philosophy' of Immanuel Kant showed how, once one departed from the evidence of the senses, knowledge must give way to faith, although (as argued in *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*) the force of moral conscience required the postulation of the existence of God as the supreme moral law giver.

- ***Revised sense of human flourishing***

Charles Taylor 2007, 18, asserts

> The coming of modern secularity in my sense has been coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything beyond this flourishing. Of no previous society was this true.

Prior to such a 'humanistic view of human destiny', the self-made man, the ultimate purpose of human development lay in life after death. Moral purpose and the moral law were not of human creation. The spiritual life was in part a discerning of the life one should live. Emphasis is increasingly place on personal autonomy, deciding oneself the life worth living – self-determination without outside reference.

- ***Loss of the personal***

Part of the secularisation of society has been a depersonalisation of the very people whose welfare should be enhanced by that society, reflected particularly in the widespread prevalence of the managerial language permeating almost every aspect of public life. This is shown in the performance-related assessment of pupil and school performance, and in the language of targets, audits, and league tables for measuring success in educational and other public services. There has even been established research centre for 'Deliverology' in the Kentucky Department of Education, advised by Sir Michael Barber, once head of 'global education practice' for the management consultancy company, Mc Kinsey. 'Deliverology' is the systematic process for 'driving progress', and 'delivering results' in education. It has the 'tools' whereby teachers might deliver more effectively at the student level what is intended at the system level. Thus parents and children become the 'customers' in increasingly marketised services.

However, it is surely necessary to retain what it means to be, and thereby to grow, as a person – the concept of 'human flourishing' which does justice to the moral and aesthetic aspects of being a person, together with personal engagement in the 'conversation between the generations of mankind' (Oakeshott 1962), as developed through active acquaintance with the different languages of that 'conversation' in literature, history, science, religion and so on.

**Consequent challenges for religious education**

The book (of which this paper is an attempted brief synopsis) addressed a problem in what might be called 'the battle for the soul of religious education', as religious studies have become a battle-ground for different versions of what such studies should be, especially in an increasingly secular society where fewer and fewer people believe and practice. But the situation is complicated by the fact that, even in schools which are formally attached to a particular faith (Catholic, Anglican, Muslim, Jewish), the pupils themselves may come from a variety of religious backgrounds or none. There are, for instance, thousands of Muslims in Catholic schools. Moreover, many such schools, especially where serving inner-city populations, will feel it their religious duty to serve the poor or deprived in that neighbourhood whether or not the families are of that religion.

Hence, 'the battle for the soul of religious education' faces many challenges which have, at least implicitly, been raised in this paper.

*The first challenge*, which appears in different ways to different people, lies in the presumed connection between having (and actively living) a faith, on the one hand, and the justification, on the other, of so believing where the basis for faith seems to lack a rational foundation. Such beliefs, so it was supposed, cannot be justified as 'true'. This challenge was, in effect, divided into two. The first aspect lies in the appreciation of what it means to have a 'faith', namely, a living impression of what was referred to as the sense of the 'sacred', of the 'numinous' or of the 'holy', as described in the work of Otto and James, or in poetry and or in great works of art – and captured so magnificently and enhanced in liturgy. Much has been written, as pointed out, about the phenomenological account of, and basis for, such religious understanding within classroom practice, and subsequently at the philosophical level.

*The second challenge*, however, lies in meeting or responding to the first one through a more philosophical examination of what such a sense of the 'numinous' or 'holiness' or sacred' means, and of the bases for such commitment – which, after all, have been systematically argued for from Aristotle onwards. Philosophical thinking and argument should thus be at the centre of Religious Education, involving the clarification of doubts as well as of beliefs and coming to appreciate the relation between reason and faith, and thus the 'reasonableness' of having a Faith, even if one fails to be fully convinced. Such philosophical engagement would address the limited and questionable understanding of 'knowledge', 'truth' and 'evidence' inherited from the *Enlightenment*.

*The third challenge* would seek to benefit from the inevitable religious mix within the school. To appreciate the Muslim 'call to prayer', for example, opens up an insight into the divine presence in their lives, a moral direction of how life should be lived in the presence of a God, a sense of community inspired by that recognition. Within the Christian denominations, there is more which is shared in common in appreciation of the sacred and divine revelation than what divides the respective followers, namely, in the messages from the Bible and in the acknowledgement of Christ and His commandments. As Marius Felderhoff (2014) asserts

> Why should one assume that a religiously plural society is incapable of agreeing on the kind of religious communications that would be acceptable to most religious communities? One obvious reason for potential agreement is that there are strong family resemblances amongst the various religious traditions; they have so much in common. They invariably pray, contemplate and worship … They encourage faith. They share key values.

*The fourth challenge* would appreciate the doubts and indifferences which arise from life lived within a secular society where the 'horizons of significance' so easily militate against a religious conception of human flourishing. Derek Lance wrote in his book *Till Christ be Formed* (1964, p.13),

> Religion is irrelevant. This is the conviction of many today, and it is a view that is having an effect on our Catholic youth. To many Catholics the Church's message is not the Good News that will make sense of their lives … . Rather, their faith, as they understand it, is a burden, a collection of dead doctrine, often couched in difficult, archaic language, which curbs and confines them.

The challenge, therefore, is to show the distinctive and attractive *ideal* of the Christian message, inspiring to all young people whether Christian or not, namely, the dignity of each person, the pervasive message of love, forgiveness and redemption, and the social message of 'the common good'. In this, as in the other challenges, the importance needs to be recognised of well conducted discussion, open to doubts and disagreement, but evidence based – along the lines of Matthew Lipman's (2003) 'community of inquiry'.

*The fifth challenge,* linked closely to the last one, would be the formation of a social, moral and spiritual consciousness, shaped by such ideals – an all-pervasive sense of moral purpose and incentive, characterising one's life as a whole, which, although central to the religious form of life, should in different ways connect with the forming moral consciousness of those without religious affiliation.

## Conclusion

As Wright (1998, 29) succinctly put it

> If pupils were to learn 'from' rather than merely about religion, then they must pass beyond the external manifestations of religious expression and enter into its experiential heart.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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