**Developing Religious Literacy in Higher Education**

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Higher education, we are told, is increasingly for all. Governments and Vice Chancellors have been encouraging ‘widening participation’, to include more students from more backgrounds in more programmes in more institutions. At the same time, universities continue to reflect their mediaeval roots (directly, or by pastiche), hanging on to the gowns and hoods, titles and roles, of a feudal age, in which learners sit at the feet of their revered Professors, advancing from Bachelor, to Master, to Professor of their subject, should they stick around long enough. The mediaeval universities were an essentially religious settlement, organised monastically, and in which the primary subjects read were Theology and Medicine. Their legacy is part of the contemporary higher education landscape.

This presents a tension because things have changed. In 1700 there were seven universities in Britain (just two in England). In 2016, there are 133 members of Universities UK, the main representative body for HEIs. The relationship between British universities and religion also changed dramatically over that period. It was not until 1871 that religious tests were fully abolished at Oxford and Cambridge, and the Victorian expansion of the university sector was in part motivated by the goal of establishing countermanding secular centres of higher learning that would be open to everyone (Gilliat-Ray 2000, p22; Graham 2005, p7-9; Rüegg 2004, pp61-64). Anglican chaplaincies remain a strong feature of higher education in this milieu. Up until the 1950s there was a widespread view that the primary reason for making most chaplaincy appointments was to serve the interests of the Anglican Church (Gilliat-Ray 2000, p29). This model of chaplaincy has since given way to one in which chaplains are understood to serve the whole university and frequently define themselves as ‘multi-faith’.

In teaching and learning too, there has been considerable change. In all the British Commonwealth countries the presence of theology reduced by 60 percent between 1915 and 1995, though in some contexts underwent revival from the 1980s on, though this time in new forms focusing especially on Islam, or the intersection between religion and public life (Frank and Gabler 2006 pp92-116). The link has also been made between the retreat of religion in universities and the emergence of academic disciplines and their attendant communities of scholars that challenged hitherto dominant forms of thinking (Edwards 2006, p84). Each discipline, according to Edwards, has developed its own procedures and vocabularies for understanding its subject matter, and as they have done so alternatives to the dominant forms of theological knowledge have inadvertently emerged. The sciences, the social sciences, then the humanities in turn “declared their independence from religion” (Edwards “Why Faculty” 2006, p84; Wittrock 1993).

Yet increasing awareness of religion, driven largely by anxieties about extremism, sex and money, have prompted some to suggest that ‘religion is back’ (Micklethwait & Wooldridge 2010), for universities as for other institutions and public spaces. 9/11; the rolling back of welfare states and the turn to faith groups to plug the gaps; new law on equality, which includes non-religious beliefs like atheism and humanism, as well as traditional religion and non-religion, like environmentalism and veganism: all of these draw attention back to what was always there anyway, and they press for a renewed public conversation. Yet we have largely lost our ability to talk about it. Schools are implicated because they too are in a muddle on religion and belief. Recent research on school RE is revealing of the conundrum (see Dinham and Shaw 2015 at www.gold.ac.uk/faithsunit/reforreal). RE is required in schools, but not in the national curriculum. Places for RE teacher training have been reduced, yet, in schools RE is a growing subject choice. Nevertheless it remains often questioned in terms of status and academic seriousness. The relationship between teaching and learning, formation, and a national statutory requirement for a daily Act of Collective Worship is vexed. As a recent RE Council report observes, the RE community is in crisis (RE Council 2013). A crucial challenge is how to work out a place for education – in schools and universities - which emerges out of a Christian past, and to some extent present, while at the same time taking fully and authentically on board the real religious landscape, which is Christian, secular, plural and non-believing. The real complexity is that it is all of these things at once. Universities pick up where schools leave off, confusing students further with a sub-textual re-playing of the old science-religion arguments, built deeply in to the epistemologies of most subjects. Professional training – much of which has also now moved in to the universities – consolidates the challenge, behaving as though the service-using public is largely not religious.

The higher education challenge begins in – and reflects - wider society. Public discourse – such as it is – tends to resonate with somewhat untested assumptions: that the West is largely secular; that religions tend to cause wars, oppress women and gay people; that they want to hold people in orthodoxies which constrict their freedoms and creativities. Likewise, it is generally supposed that the public sphere is a secular sphere, by which is usually meant a somehow neutral sphere when it comes to religion and belief. Thus in their book, *Religion & Change in Modern Britain*, Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto write about:

“…a characteristic assumption of the post war period: that religion has become a purely private matter with no public or political significance. So long as this idea prevailed, both in scholarship and in society, it was possible to treat religions as discrete entities which could be analysed solely in terms of their inner logics…” (Woodhead & Catto 2012 p2)

They challenge this, saying that religion is not an *aside* to economics, politics, media, the law “…and other arenas” (ibid p2) but is indeed integral to them. ‘Private religion, public sphere’ is an antinomy which makes less and less sense as the religion and belief landscape becomes increasingly apparent once more. How can universities reflect this? There are nettles here which have not been grasped because of the even bigger questions which they raise - what can be meant by national values and identity, and what is the proper role of Christianity in the apparatus of state under circumstances which have changed so dramatically and which are now so highly plural?

**Universities**

Restoring order in how we think about religion and belief is a pressing task for education at all levels, and universities have a particular part to play. This was explicitly recognised in policy and practice, as well as in theory, when in 2009 the Higher Education Council for England (HEFCE), a government body in England, began to engage in a discussion with academics about religion in the universities, which I was appointed to direct.

At first a driving force in this conversation for many of those interested in it was anxiety about extremism on university campuses. But I wanted to argue for a different way of thinking about this. My first point was that extremism is a tiny minority problem, although it is absolutely right to take it very seriously indeed because the consequences can be catastrophic when things go wrong. I also argued that extremism on campuses is itself both rare and notoriously hard to judge (see Dinham and Jones 2012). Indeed, radicalism and contestation are what universities *should* be for, so where does one draw the line? But most importantly, I felt, an approach based on anxiety about extremism casts religion and belief as a problem first and foremost, and I wanted to argue that this need not be the starting point. I thought it would be much more effective—and much more realistic—to set religion and belief in their proper context and seek engagement rather than solutions. After all, religion and belief are not ‘something else’, ‘somewhere else’. They are highly present and pervasive, especially in the light of globalisation and migration, which put us all in to daily encounter with a rich diversity of religion and belief, whatever our own religion, belief or none. In particular, if governments want faiths to fill the welfare gaps, and faiths are visible again as a result, we need to be good at talking about faiths again. We need education to equip us to do so.

The Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education programme has been one response, working in universities in the first instance, though subsequently broadening its reach to work with employer groups and service providers as well, and crucially also in schools. Universities are a good place to start because they are places of peculiarly intense encounter, especially but not exclusively among young people. They are often even more plural and mixed than the rest of society around them, though sometimes the precise opposite is true—which brings with it a different set of problems. They are also precisely designed to encourage debate about interesting and difficult issues. Many Western societies have become quite good at discussing race, gender and sexual orientation for example. But on religion and belief they are stuck.

Second, universities embody what liberalism takes to be a range of essential freedoms – namely, freedom of speech and freedom of thought. These are the basis of academic freedom; however, religions are sometimes seen as an obstacle to such freedoms.

Thirdly, universities reproduce and reflect a particular post-religious way of thinking, intellectually, which tends to reject religion as distracting nonsense. As these assumptions are produced and reproduced in university settings, they are part of the formation of minds which underpins the conversation in wider society. So, it turns out to matter very much what universities think about religion, even though they may have thought of themselves as secular and therefore neutral on the matter.

These may be pressing reasons for taking religion more seriously in university operations, but this still leaves the vexed question of whether and how to take religion seriously in curricula. How, if at all, should teaching and learning respond? This question goes for education all the way up and down, from primary school level to PhD and professional education and training. In some subjects of course, religion is simply a topic of relevance as in history and in Religious Studies itself. In others it is a cultural legacy to be decoded and understood, as revealed in the growing tendency to teach ‘Introduction to the Bible’ to students of English Literature so they can manage Milton or Donne. In others again, it embodies the opposite of the rational, scientific method which predominates in higher education, and in relation to which practically all other disciplines have cut their teeth. As such it is an utter irrelevance, as in Richard Dawkins’ comparison between astrology and astronomy. In some cases this produces hostility against all religious ideas. This is likely to feel painful for students who, as some of our research shows, can feel uncomfortable to hear lecturers be quite rude or offensive about their beliefs or about belief in general. In the social sciences, unlike race, gender, or sexual orientation, religion has rarely been a variable. It simply does not often count as a topic to be counted.

So where are we now? I have observed a lamentable quality of conversation about religion: at the same time, a pressing need for a better quality of conversation in order to avoid knee-jerk reactions which focus only on ‘bad’ religion. Universities understand that they have got to get better at providing really excellent student experience, and what is starting to emerge alongside is a bigger debate about the role of religion in teaching and learning. This all reflects a crucial contention in the rest of society about the re-emergence of religious faith as a public category at all. How and what we teach and learn about religion and belief in this milieu will be a key part of how we handle these identities in the context of community relations, public services, trade and commerce, and foreign affairs in the decades to come.

**Doing Religious Literacy**

The Religious Literacy in Higher Education Programme has enabled an understanding and evolution of a concept and a practice of religious literacy which is intended to provide the beginnings, at least, of a discourse – a language and a grammar, as the term implies – for talking better about religion and belief. This starts with challenges to the theoretical assumptions which underpin the conversation. It goes on to a practice of religious literacy, conceived of as a journey.

As programme director, and with my board of academics and senior sector administrators, it was immediately obvious that here was an issue of enormous significance and urgency, yet with almost no language which could adequately begin to address it. I liken it to the state of public discourse on race in the 1960s and gender in the 1970s – that is to say, hugely prominent but largely unformed. Developing a discourse seemed like the pressing task, and it needed to be both thoughtful and theorized on the one hand, and publicly accessible and practical on the other. Where to start?

I began with an analysis of the religious literacy challenge in higher education contexts. This involved theoretical engagement with the relationship between religion and universities, alongside empirical research work to understand the preoccupations of university leaders, the stances this could lead to, and the practical challenges of university as big operations. In terms of theoretical engagement, a literature review quickly revealed a paucity of attention to religion in higher education at all, though there is more in the United States than in the UK and elsewhere. A body of literature has emerged that has examined the history of religion in higher education (Reuben 1996; Hart 1999; Roberts and Turner 2000), the recent ‘re-emergence’ of religion on university campuses (Edwards 2008; Wuthnow 2008), and the implications of increasing religious diversity for teaching and research (Edwards 2006; Tisdell 2008). Partly inspired by the widely discussed ‘deprivatisation’ of religious traditions and communities of faith since the end of the Cold War (Casanova 1994; Berger 1999; Habermas 2007), this literature has renewed an old debate about the responsibilities of universities in a world marked by the ‘complex co-presence’ (Ford 2004 p24) of a variety of often competing religious and secular philosophical traditions. As with the US literature, what UK literature there was focused on religion and belief as a surprise and as a risk to be managed.

A number of scholars based in the UK (Ford 2004; Gilliat-Ray 2000; Woodhead 2012b 28) and the US (Prothero 2007) have argued that the education system, and particularly universities, could play a vital role in improving the quality of these vexed conversations. For example, Ford has contended, as part of a comprehensive rationale for the public role of universities in relation to religious faith, that higher education institutions (HEIs) “ought to be taking far more seriously than they do their responsibility to contribute to the coming century by engaging with the issues arising from the simultaneously religious and secular character of our world” (Ford 2004, p25). Similarly, Graham (2005, pp243-261) has argued that universities have a vital role to play as part of a society’s cultural infrastructure, and that one part of this role is consideration of both religious and secular spiritual values. A different take on the same issue is provided by Gilliat-Ray (2000, p59), who chooses to stress, not the role that universities can have in educating about religion, but bringing young people from diverse backgrounds into contact. “Universities”, she observes, “are sites of cultural engagement and exploration, and if issues of religious diversity, rights and representation cannot be debated and explored in this context, then where else?”

Another rich theoretical seam focuses on the post-religious mindedness of the HE sector, steeped as it is in the principles and practices of scientific method and Enlightenment philosophy. Thus it is possible to describe the changes to UK HE in terms of a decline in dominant traditional forms of religion followed by burgeoning religious diversity: HE in the UK has undergone a process of secularisation, rapidly followed by an increase in diversity that heralds what has been called a ‘post-secular’ phase. This can be illustrated by looking at university chaplaincy, for example. Up until the 1950s there was a widespread view that the primary reason for making most chaplaincy appointments was to serve the interests of the Anglican Church (Gilliat-Ray 2000, p29). However, this model of chaplaincy began to give way in the 1960s and 1970s, with chaplains starting to serve the whole university.

This analysis in turn gave way to an engagement with more recent literature, especially in the sociology of religion, drawing attention not so much to the post-religious as the post-secular, and to dramatic changes in the real religious landscape, and how to think about it. Thus, the UK 2011 Census tells us that Christianity remains the largest religion in England and Wales but is down from 71% to 59%. We know that Muslims are the next biggest religious group with 4.8% and this is the most increasing group, up from 3.0%. Meanwhile the proportion of the population who reported they have no religion has now reached a quarter in the UK and this is an increase from 14.8% to 25.1%. According to other sources and other questions, *what* we believe has changed too. Belief in ‘a personal God’ roughly halved between 1961 and 2000 – from 57% of the population to 26%. But over exactly the same period, belief in a ‘spirit or life force’ doubled  – from 22% in 1961 to 44% in 2000 (see Woodhead, 2012).

Of course, the data are hugely debatable and other sources say different things, but the trends are clear enough. They point to how religious forms have been changing in this period, as well as the religious mix and the mix of religion and non-religion. Society continues to be secular but also Christian and plural, and its religion is more informal. All of these things are happening together. It is important to grasp this through learning because there appears to be a *real* religious landscape and one imagined by policy makers, professions and publics, and there is a growing gap between them (see Dinham 2012).

At the root of, and consolidating the muddle, the conversation is usually couched in terms of society as somehow secular – and this is usually equated with neutrality. The conversation about religion is impeded by the paucity of the conversation about the secular too. Yet the secular frequently appears in the debate in just as fuzzy a form as much that is said about religion. These complications leave a lot to be desired, drawing as they often do on old tropes and stereotypes about religion causing wars, and fuelling the oppression of minorities. Hence we hear primarily about sex, money and violence, and the dominant discourse has split in to three areas of anxiety, each of which plays out in higher education: 1. how do we prevent atrocities in religions’ name ? This finds expression in the security agenda, reflected in the UK government’s Prevent policies (see Dinham 2012), to which many students unions have especially objected; 2. how do we respond when atrocities happen? This is expressed in the cohesion agenda, reflected in universities in the language of ‘widening participation’, but also raising questions about how to learn well about religion and belief diversity in disciplinary contexts which have largely bracketed it out; and 3. how do we engage with the religion and belief which is there in ordinary everyday life, regardless of its role in cohesion and security, and their opposites? The dilemmas here have given rise to many university controversies, about public speakers, accommodating Ramadan during exam periods, the replacement of Christmas services with ‘winter celebrations’, and the provision of halal and kosher food in canteens (amongst many more).

Following this analysis phase, the programme then turned to empirical research to flesh out what these analyses mean and how they play out in practice. The focus was two-tiered. There was one focus on university leaderships to find out what preoccupies them, and where this sits in the overall analyses; and another with operational staff in practical settings such as admissions, accommodations, timetabling and catering (amongst others) to find out what sorts of issues were being encountered.

**Religious Literacy Leadership**

In research undertaken with Vice Chancellors and other staff in 2009-10, we found two helpful considerations (see Dinham & Jones 2012). The first was about the sort of stances universities think they take in relation to religion and belief. The second was what motivates practical action in relation to religion and belief. In relation to the first, we identified four university stances, or ‘types’, which appear to be easily translatable in to a range of other sectors and settings across wider society (Dinham and Jones 2012). In the first type, society is conceived of as a secular space where public institutions remain as far as possible neutral and education avoids mentioning religions or belief. We called this group ‘soft neutral’. A similar but firmer line actively seeks the protection of public space from religious faith, asserting a duty to preserve public bodies, such as universities, as secular. We called this group ‘hard neutral’. Others saw religious faith as a potential learning and formation resource upon which to draw. A larger number of the VCs we spoke to took this view, with many stressing that their campus is friendly to religions and religious people, and comfortable with religious diversity. We called this group ‘Repositories and Resources’. The fourth approach we identified aims to offer education ‘for the whole person’, incorporating a specifically religious or belief dimension. This perspective was more common in universities which were founded as religious institutions. We called this group ‘Formative-Collegial’.

The second issue we asked about was what sorts of matters about religion preoccupy Vice Chancellors and other university leaders. Here we found that practical and policy concerns inflected the debate. Vice Chancellors were concerned about issues in four key areas. First, they were focused on legal action arising out of possible discrimination on the grounds of religion and belief; second, about campus extremism and violence; third, about being able to market their universities to students of all religion and belief backgrounds and none; and fourth, especially about appealing to international students, including those from all parts of the world, and from all religion and belief traditions, identities and backgrounds. These were very concrete and practical concerns, and could be primarily characterised in terms of anxieties detectable in wider society, about being sued and being bombed. On the other hand they were interested in the potential opportunities, as well as the risks, (in terms of ‘widening participation’ and attracting international students). This too reflects an interest in faith groups in wider society for what they can bring to the table, in welfare and in the provision of schools particularly.

We also looked at who attended religious literacy programme training events (in 2010-11) and found that the majority were from chaplaincies and equalities teams in universities. This reflects a widespread assumption amongst our sample that ‘religion’ is something that is done in the chaplaincy primarily, with little resonance or relevance in the wider life of the institution. The risk is that religion is ‘bracketed off’ in this way, rather than understood as something which pervades universities, and wider societies.

**Religious Literacy Practices**

We finally conducted case study research in three universities to understand the narratives of religious faith as they are experienced by students and staff. This enabled us to dig down in to the many practical ways in which faith plays out in universities much more widely. We found students who had not felt able to attend for interviews, or for exams, or for Saturday lectures because of clashes with religious events. There were anxieties about public speakers and what to ‘allow’ them to say on topics like Israel and Zionism. Timetabling staff were worried about how to handle the exam periods for the years after 2014 when Ramadan coincides with it. Canteens and bars were taking all sorts of stands for or against halal food, alcohol-free events, and single-sex socials, and there were bitter rumours in one institution that the Muslims were receiving subsidized lunches. There were sports societies whose members were ribbing a Sikh for wearing the 5 K’s (worn by orthodox Sikhs: kesh – uncut hair; kara – armband; kangha – comb; kacchera – knee length shorts; and kirpan – sword). Residences were struggling with kosher kitchens and women-only halls. Campus banks either could or could not handle the requests of Muslim students for halal borrowing for student fees while counselling services felt they could not discuss religion with religious students.

The theoretical and empirical work would never be useful if it was not also linked to action, and the programme had an action orientation built in from the outset. The intention was to translate what we found theoretically and empirically in to training, and this was developed in a wide range of areas. We devised training workshops for Vice Chancellors and their senior delegates, designed to draw their attention to the critique and analysis we have undertaken and to stimulate university leaderships to consider their own stances and how these affected the tone and practice of their institutions. We also delivered training workshops to upwards of 600 HE staff – academic and administrative – from more than 100 universities. exploring the analyses and stances evolved from the leadership work, but also working to induce bottom-up solutions to concrete dilemmas in student services, timetabling, accommodation, food and alcohol, dress and etiquette, and a whole range of practical issues and settings. This included our devising specialist workshops on religion and belief law, and in conflict resolution, in partnership with expert bodies in these areas. All of this was reflected upon and fed back in to the process over a number of years (see Dinham and Jones 2012).

**A Religious Literacy Framework**

The experience of this process of thinking, researching, training and reflecting has reified a religious literacy framework which is intended as a way of thinking about religion and belief, not only in university spaces, but across wider society. Underpinning it are a number of key observations which make it much more than a simple acquisition of knowledge. First, religious literacy is a problem of the developed West (including New Zealand and Australia), in that it is ill-conceived secular-mindedness – what I have sometimes called subconscious secularity - that assumes a post-religious world, and seeks to act as though it is one. The secular paradigm, in all its varying and contested forms, is itself a product of Western intellectual life and tradition, rooted in Enlightenment philosophy, scientific method and the discipline of sociology, representing a shift from explanations of the world based in God – ‘theo-logy’ – to explanations rooted in the immanent – ‘socio-logy’. Second, religious literacy is a liberal endeavour. It stands in the liberal values of human rights, social justice and freedoms of speech and thought, and invites people of all religions, beliefs and none to engage with religion and belief diversity in this spirit. It does not extend as far as respecting and tolerating any and all expressions of religion or belief, where those expressions cut across liberal ones. It is thereby normative, in that it has purposes and goals: peaceful encounter across religion and belief differences. Third, religious literacy is context-specific. One size does not fit all. Understanding and responding to the religion and belief landscape of any particular sector or setting, is the key task of religious literacy, and within the overall critiques and values set out, it must be approached anew each time. Thus religious literacy requires a journey which in my conception of it takes place in four parts.

First, we have to understand religion as a category, drawing especially on sociology of religion to understand the real religious landscape, and how to think about it critically – including how to think well about the secular. In our HE work we have repeatedly observed a tension between readiness to use the terms ‘religion’ and ‘secular’ on the one hand, and a lack of definition of those terms on the other. There, as in wider society, there is limited understanding of how much religion and belief have changed in the 20th century, and the dominance of the idea of secularity in sociology as the primary lens through which to understand religion has translated in to its dominance more broadly. Yet the notion of secularity is both widely misunderstood and highly nuanced. In HE we found that its often used to mean ‘neutrality’. There is no shortage of resources for thinking more carefully about these terms and simple vague reference to ‘secular universities’ will not suffice. Thus Wilson’s classic proposal that religion is losing it’s social significance (1966) is taken on by Berger’s suggestion that religion will disappear to a vanishing point (1967). Davie counters with the observation that people are believing without belonging (1994) and Hervieu-Leger inverts this to add that people are also belonging without believing (2006). Woodhead concludes that while traditional religion may be in decline, new spiritual and informal forms are thriving (2012), which Bruce dismisses, saying that all this religion talk is nothing but a last gasp before it finally disappears, as originally predicted (2011).Clarity about what is meant by religion is key. Does it refer to the traditional religions – the world religions - and if so how many of them count? Or does it encompass non-traditional, revival and informal modes too, like Druidism, Paganism, and Spiritualism? Might it extend to ‘beliefs’, such as atheism and agnosticism? Or to non-religious beliefs, such as secularism and humanism? Clarity about the secular is crucial too, since it is so often the context in which the conversation is assumed to take place. Being clear about these categorical issues is the first stage in moving towards religious literacy.

Second, we have to understand dispositions – what emotional and atavistic assumptions are brought to the conversation and what are the affects of people’s own positions in relation to religion or belief? We know that higher education is steeped in both the religious-mediaeval and the post-religious Enlightenment, and carries forward aspects of each at the same time, though often in sub-textual ways. In operations and practice, higher education institutions still tend towards the mediaeval, using ancient titles, dress, and ceremonial, and being arranged residentially, like the old monastic colleges, even when those inheritances are pastiche, rather than continuations. Yet in teaching and learning they largely eschew religion from curricula, having organized around disciplinary communities formed at least in part against the old epistemologies which they were developed to replace. This is a significant issue in general, in that students have come almost entirely to lack a framework for thinking or engaging well with religion and belief, just at the point at which globalization, migration, equality and human rights discourses put them in to daily encounter with the greatest religion and belief diversity in history. It is also a significant issue specifically, for students of the professions, since professional training has come so markedly in to the universities, where students need to be prepared for practice with publics who will be just as diverse. Moving from the sub-textual and atavistic – the largely untested assumptions and emotions which underpin so much learning – to the expressly understood will be crucial if students are to engage thoughtfully with the religion and belief they encounter. One example of the challenge is the common use of the acceptable notion of spirituality in social work as a proxy for the unacceptable term, religion.

Only once these issues have been addressed can one pass on in to knowledge, based on identifying what we need to know, in each specific setting, and having the confidence and wherewithal to know who and what to ask. In the professions, a social worker practicing in Solihull will need different religious literacy knowledge than a medic in Manchester or a lawyer in Leeds. Inside the universities, the demographic of each will also vary significantly and there is both an immediate task – of being ready to engage with the religion and belief encounter at hand – and a formational one – of being able to translate that in to any contingent space in the future. It is obvious that nobody can know everything. An engagement with religion and belief as identity, rather than tradition, is required as a release from the notion that we can and ought to learn the A-Z of a *tradition* in order to have religious literacy. Rather, it is about recognising that the same religions and beliefs are different in different people and places. Sometimes they differ within the same person, from one day to the next.

Finally, there are skills – how does what I know translate in to skilful encounter, and am I clear what the encounter is for? If it is to improve interfaith relations, I need different skills than if it is to appoint a person to a job, marry someone I love from another faith, or to resolve a conflict from a desk in the Foreign Office. Identifying what these skills are is a task for research in to the challenges and obstacles of religion and belief in specific sectors and settings. For example in social work and nursing, there is a rhetoric in curricula about spirituality, but this appears to translate in to very little engagement with religion or belief in classrooms and practice settings. Knowing more about why not will facilitate and support revisions to curricula which prepare social workers and nurses for the encounter.

It has been suggested that religious literacy can go one step further, to enable a renewed encounter with the wisdoms which reside in religions and beliefs. For David Ford and Mike Higton this is reached through the study of theology and its application to everyday life (see Ford and Higton in Dinham and Francis 2015). These are, after all, ‘wisdom traditions’. This draws attention to how strange it seems that millennia of insight, experience, drama, and poetry, should be set aside exclusively in favour of the natural scientific paradigm of modernity, and its social scientific followers. That in turn draws our attention to the serious reform that would be needed to universities’ current ideas of what counts as knowledge if we are to engage with such ‘wisdoms’. These are fundamental epistemological issues which need to be addressed.

**The Future**

On religion and belief, religious literacy is at the root of a good future. It may only be needed – or the categorical and dispositional parts anyway - in the first half of this century, as we regain the conversation through education in school and universities and a generation is equipped for the task. In the meantime, equipping the public sphere *now* with the ability to have the conversation will be the urgent task of professional training and CPD in every sector and setting. Theology and Religious Studies programmes across British HE are recognising this, and courses in ‘Religion and…’ are beginning to emerge. How the other disciplines engage is crucial, and new work is beginning to analyse this already (see Baker and Dinham 2015 at www.gold.ac.uk/faithsunit/reimaginingreligion).

More generally, religious literacy challenges rather than reproduces the over-simplifications of declining religion and a secular trajectory. Across the West these have come to be expressed in terms of the catastrophic polarisation of an enlightened Europe and a perennially backward Islam, and this plays out in anxieties about ‘good campus relations’ and Prevent in university campuses. Charlie Hebdo encapsulates what goes wrong with the conversation and how pressing is the religious literacy need. Islam is after all a civilised and civilising force, at the forefront of architectural, artistic, social, scientific and political innovation for centuries. It does not need to look more like Europe. Europe and Islam infuse each other, as well as diverge. Religious literacy means recognising this. It also means pulling perspective on the real religious landscape, which is neither post-Christian or post-religious, nor dominated by Islam.

Arendt writes “for the first time in history, all peoples on earth have a common present…every country has become the almost immediate neighbour of every other country, and every man feels the shock of events which take place at the other end of the globe” (Arendt 1955 p83). This “unity of the world” could result in “a tremendous increase in mutual hatred and a somewhat mutual irritability of everybody against everybody else”. Or it could simply demand a growing up to the realisation that the West’s story of religion is not the only one and it will not survive such globalisation if it chooses intransigence. This both applies to and is informed by the West’s universities. Some talk of the post-secular future. But we are all of this at once – secular, post-secular; religious and post-religious. These ideas are sedimented, not relegated. Some envisage a frightening and sinister future. But one of the Enlightenment’s successes, as discovered by and within the universities – the detachment of the spheres of theos from politics – will be best sustained by a public sphere which can retain the distinction but welcome both. As holders of the Enlightenment as well as inheritors of the religious, Universities are challenged to rethink their practices, but also their assumptions and epistemologies about religion and belief, and how they are learnt.

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