

SUMMARY

RELIGIOUS LITERACY: A WAY FORWARD FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION?

A Report Submitted to the Culham St Gabriel's Trust

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The idea of ‘religious literacy’ continues to capture the attention of practitioners, scholars and policy makers in the field of religious education, both as an aim for religious education and as an organising principle for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. ‘Being literate’ suggests that one is knowledgeable about religions and able to navigate the complexities of religious domains, which seems to be a worthwhile ambition for religious education. It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that the notion of religious literacy figures regularly in recent discussions about religious education. Yet despite the ongoing interest, religious literacy has not become the notion around which discussions about the present and future of religious education have come together. This may have to do with a lack of clarity about what the idea of religious literacy entails, but also with continuing questions about what it would mean to make religious literacy the ongoing principle for classroom practice.

The main ambition of this report is to provide further clarity about the idea of religious literacy, both as an aim for religious education and as an organising principle for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. For this we have reviewed selected literature on literacy, literacy education, religious literacy, and religious education, mainly focusing on discussions in the UK context and literature from the English-speaking world. A draft version of the report was discussed with scholars from the field of religious education and literacy education from the UK and other countries, and with teachers and teacher educators working in religious education in England. Our intention with this report, is not to draw any final conclusions about the usefulness of religious literacy for religious education, but rather to inform further discussions about its potential value.

The report opens with a discussion of the meanings of literacy. We emphasise that beyond the historical and sociological dimensions of literacy, it is imperative to grasp that it is a deeply political concept. It is argued that it is important to highlight the educational assumptions underlying the idea of literacy itself. The metaphor of literacy as navigation is explored to highlight that being literate means not only that one is able find one’s way around in a particular domain or terrain, but also that one can be critical of how the domains are being defined, and by whom. Finally, we present a way of evaluating discussions of literacy in educational contexts. The next section of the report presents a historical review of religious education in the UK in order to map out the contemporary context. Here we highlight that what it means to live a religious life can be conceptualised in different ways, for example as propositional belief

and tradition as well as in terms of existence. This is followed by a section in which we reconstruct and discuss the emergence and development of the term ‘religious literacy.’ The stances of Wright, Prothero, Moore and Dinham are considered, and we draw attention to the broader context of religion and the growing socio-political calls for religious literacy. The discourse about religious literacy covers more than questions about the aims and contents of religious education in schools. We then engage in a critical discussion of the term religious literacy that draws explicitly on the exploration of literacy. In the final section of the report we draw some conclusions and provide some preliminary points to consider when answering the question as to whether religious literacy can and/or should be a ‘way forward’ for religious education.

We do think that a convincing case can be made in favour of the idea that education should assist in helping children and young people to become knowledgeable about a wide range of different religious beliefs and practices, on the simple assumption that such beliefs and practices continue to shape contemporary societies. However, although equating this with religious literacy may be relatively uncontroversial, it does raise important questions about how different religious beliefs and practices may best be represented as well as how the existential dimension of what it means to live a religious life can be included. Having said this our view is that that such a form of religious literacy would be an appropriate ambition for *all* education rather than being held as the main task for religious education.