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'Doing God' in ethics and education: a play in five acts

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This is a story of the intertwining of Moral Education (ME) with Religious Education (RE) in a professional lifetime. It is told episodically. Instead of the purported intellectual respectability of total separation of one from the other, even elimination of one by the other, it favours their mutual critique. It begins with strong sentiment, inspired in part by an early exposure to American Social Gospel thinking. It unwinds and rewinds to create a tapestry for lifespan research which considers how children and young people begin an engagement with religion and ethics which will extend into their future lives. Alongside this is the development of a university curriculum in which Christianity is challenged by other faiths and philosophies, and equal attention is given to Social Ethics as to Religion. Empathy and mutual enrichment are prioritised throughout, and provide a procedural base for national ecumenical endeavour. Finally, it reflects on the moral learning which has taken place during this process, with implications for the *Journal of Moral Education*.

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Prologue

How desirable is it to bring together professional experience and practical application with academic disciplines? What is the relation between Moral Education (ME) and Religious Education (RE)? Since its first issue in October 1971, these issues have continually lurked within the pages of the *JME*, as in my own thinking.

Forty years ago, in the UK context from and for which the *JME* was initially produced, the desirability of affirming the integrity and worth of ME in its own right was strong. Society might still be described as predominantly Christian, but secular confidence was such that independence of any overt religious link had become a common trademark of intellectual maturity. Several members of the then new *JME* Editorial Board (e.g. James Hemming and Christopher Macy) had been active in the late sixties campaign to replace RE with ME. A few (e.g. Peter McPhail and John Wilson), whilst retaining an RE link, favoured parallel play, with entirely separate development and provision. One way or another, ME, like Ethics, was autonomous (Hirst, 1965; Cooling, 2010, Ch.1).

My own position then, as since, was one of respect coupled with suspicion towards those who wield an academic discipline, such as philosophy, psychology or sociology, in a way that purports to be educationally open whilst actually being closed. Instead of genuine understanding, the explanatory interpretation becomes reductionist. Thus the liberal voice of secular humanism is almost drowned by that of the militantly secularist. The likes of Richard Dawkins (2006) and Christopher Hitchens (2007), may be powerfully persuasive in their advocacy of atheism, but they overlook the fact that there are different theisms, and that not all religions are theistic. They also invite the question whether or not within their own personal lives they operate on an examined but unproven basis of belief or faith.

Thirty years ago, in the UK the context had already changed significantly from Christianity alone versus secularity. Especially in larger towns and cities both primary and secondary school populations were increasingly diverse in terms of both ethnicity and religions (Bowker 1987, Parsons 1994). Arguably however, in spite of this diversity, the dominant cultural narrative in the media and amongst academics was to perceive and respond to the religious aspect as dated and dying (Gilbert 1980). Whilst such views legitimately continue, only in the last decade, has the distinctive presence of vibrant

religions in the everyday news agenda exposed dogmatic secularism as no less open to question than the beliefs which it had previously dismissed as non-rational.

I take the view that in the interests of better ME and better RE we would be wiser to think twice before repeating the unqualified assertion about the total independence of ethics. Or at least it should be accompanied by an equally legitimate assertion of the autonomy of religion. Far better for both would be a shared affirmation of the relative autonomy of ethics and of religion. Properly understood they are in a position of mutual check, the one of the other. And internationally, does not the omission of religion from the common school curriculum in any country provide opportunity for the singular religious and moral illiteracy that literalises a Second Coming or legitimates violent extremism to go unchallenged?

Act One: 1960s —youthful protest

Once upon a time there was a youngish man of 24. He'd studied Theology at Oxford and followed that with two years in the USA: more Theology, more Social Ethics (Rauschenbusch, 1907; Little & Twiss, 1978)—which he'd gone there to pursue—and much more engagement with human deprivation. What he saw and felt was the result of those who had experienced racial segregation (Alabama, Martin Luther King and James Baldwin), war (Vietnam, Sloane Coffin Jr and Thich Nhat Hanh) or failed abortions and mental breakdown (New York's Bellevue Hospital). What were the churches doing to address these?

He knew the Bible somewhat and was greatly moved by the passion of the prophets like Amos, Jeremiah and Isaiah. Like John the Baptist, and much later like Muhammad, they lambasted the people around them for pursuing self interest above the common good.

> I hate and despise your religious celebrations and your times of worship. I won't accept your offerings, or animal sacrifices —not even your very best. No more of your noisy songs! I won't listen when you play your harps. But let justice and fairness flow like a river that never runs dry. (The Bible, *Amos* 5:21-4)

It wasn't that he applied this literally and rejected all forms of Christian liturgical

celebration. These could on occasion be moving and expressive of transforming faith. But there was a troubling institutional arrogance when churches presented themselves as the source of all answers, especially when they were even the cause of some of the problems. God, as proclaimed by the Bible and confirmed by believers since, is to be found in the world and wider universe, as much in the flower or the star, or the nearest 'thou' at hand. We are met by this reality in our daily living, but we do not always get below the surface.

Going into Westminster Abbey one day on his return from the USA, he became acutely aware of a dissonance between the mass of religious artefacts and the pain and poverty in the world at large. It seemed to him as though the sheer weight of religion, nationally treasured in this darkened space, was itself overwhelming of the humanity it should be serving and glorifying as God's. Perhaps the way best to tell people what was being ignored would actually be to blow it up!

Of course he didn't. That would have been further to deface the humanity of the God who is within all human striving, as also within the natural universe and multiplicity beyond. But pain felt deeply by at least some suicide bombers may be soaked in the same moral anguish as that of the prophets in Biblical and Qur'anic texts. Tragically, the exaggerated tone of their language has become literalised and, as that happens, devotion becomes blind to seeing all human beings as sons of God. Thus the misplaced concreteness of fundamentalism fails to discern what is more truly fundamental.

I tell this tale as a backdrop to what I wish to say on the subject of the challenges now facing the *JME* and its readers across the world. Achieving justice and peace, like the balancing of power and love, in a world alive with individual and institutional self-interest, does not come easily. If it is to be true to its potential, the *JME* needs to keep this in mind.

Act Two: 1970s —research across the educational lifespan

From the outset of a career of teaching and research in education, I was convinced of the central interplay of subject poles—of the subject of study and of the studying subject. I remain so. Conceptually the territory is that of theology and religion, ethics and morality, and they stand their ground as inherently related academic enterprises in their own right. But they are also rooted at the heart of individual search for meaning, which goes on

across the length and breadth of a person's life. I was intrigued to understand the developmental 'knitting' process involved. Initially, my research concentrated on the forms which beliefs and values take across the mainstream of children's daily life. Decades later I have begun to follow up on the longitudinal extension of their beliefs and values into the now middle-aged years of these same individuals.

At the start in the 1970s my research concentrated on the 5–16 age range. The sample was balanced for age and gender, as also for specific religious representation (Anglican, Free Church and Roman Catholic; Jewish, Muslim and Sikh; and no religious belonging). There was an hour-long written interview (1500 participants) plus another hour of individually recorded interview (340).

The focus of the interviews was deliberately multi-dimensional. This is principally because religion and ethics ramify across the whole of life, and also as a prompt for maintaining interest. As a check on the comprehensiveness of religious traditions across civilisations, I drew on Ninian Smart's use of dimensions (Smart, 1969). In order to discover any personal coherence in understanding between the individual dimensions and across the fronts of religion and everyday life, I designed the interview schedule to include propositional reasoning, story and fantasy, ethics and evaluation, ritual and play, personal experience and social ordering. Each dimension was explored in both explicit religious and ordinary secular expressions, with the latter extending into scientific and political understanding.

Appropriate research techniques and protocols were deployed. What emerged was testimony to the richness and interconnectedness of each child's understanding of the world in which they found themselves. There was individual comparability in modes of reasoning relating to science, society and religion, as well as the grounds for believing and disbelieving in religion and superstition. Every one was jigsawing from across his or her experience to arrive at a personally coherent frame within which to live (Gates, 2007, Ch. 9–15.)

So far the research concentrated on the lateral extension of religion across the whole span of the boy or girl's experience. To this, 40 years on, I am now adding the longitudinal extension of religion and ethics into later life. I am trying to make contact with any I originally interviewed. I invite them to re-do the written exercise and again go

through the individual oral interview. I then share with them what they previously wrote and let them see and hear what they originally said. Finally, I encourage them to reflect on how and why their own views have developed and changed.

Though it will take at least another two years to locate a representative sample, it already emerges that, traditional religious vocabulary is a problem for many, along with the heightened moral challenges of the changing world. Significantly, the interplay of subject of study and studying subject is observable in both those being interviewed and the interviewer; though changed and changing, they are the constants throughout.

Act Three: 1980s—the makings of a multi-perspectival professional context

For over 25 years I was head of the department of Religion and Ethics at St Martin's College (eventually the University of Cumbria), a Christian foundation whose degrees were distinctive in prizing both academic and professional qualities. We developed a base offering primary and secondary education degrees specialising in Religious Studies; three-year degrees in Religious Studies, Social Ethics, and Christian Ministry; plus postgraduate awards.

In appreciation of the St Martin's founding vision, it was vital that available degrees included biblical, cultural, historical, and theological components specific to Christianity. And because that vision is universalist in seeing the universe and all knowledge within it as deriving from God, it was no less important that these same degrees should include comparative, contextual and critiquing components (Smart, 1973). Comparative components included courses in Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and Islam. Contextual disciplinary components included Law, Psychology, Philosophy, Social Science. Critiquing components included Religious and Atheistic Thought, Mission and Dialogue, Faith Health and Culture. The principle of mutual interrogation between different belief systems, as between subjects studying and subject of study, was present throughout.

In consequence of my own learning experience at Bellevue Hospital, and later when teaching at Goldsmiths College in London, courses offered opportunities for student field trips and placements in UK schools and parishes, with police, social workers and in law courts, with hospital doctors, nurses and chaplains, with prison warders, in

order to engage with a particular place, person or community—exceptionally even living for a term in a village in Kerala, S. India and meeting local Hindus, Muslims and Christians in a largely rural but highly literate context.

One of my principal reasons for introducing the degree in Social Ethics was that I saw it as providing an academic underpinning for ME, comparable to Religious Studies for RE. Without that, ME could too easily become an amateur also-ran. What I had not anticipated was the extent to which the term ME would become attenuated in common usage as 'being moralistic', or its elision with sexual morality. Over the last 15 years it has all but disappeared from UK government publications on education, and even its surrogate 'values' appears infrequently and undefined. This cultural shift has coincided with the widespread introduction of professional codes of conduct and appeals to 'political correctness'; however welcome in principle, they risk becoming extrinsic when not grounded in explicit moral sense.

There is a potential risk of academic relativism which can arise in connection with a multi-perspectival approach to both ethics and religion. The process of exploring different world views and different social scientific accounts of their coherence, status and applications can itself be undermining of prior personal convictions. Paralysis from analytical complexity and/or confusion from the diversity of living frameworks can be debilitating for individual decision and action. Well taught, however, the reverse is true. Students engage with the challenges of alternative thinking to their own and of the implications of different belief systems in specific settings. They test and refine their own stances and do this before any delayed confrontation with such challenges in future personal and professional contexts. There is a foundation here for many different futures, and the students' subsequent employment successes showed this to be true.

For both ME and RE, I see empathy as a fundamental virtue—academic, professional and personal. I have therefore been delighted to see students develop the capacity imaginatively and fairly to represent the world views of others. For many years in England it has been taken as a professional given that RE teachers will be so capable of empathising with different religious traditions that they can represent them in the classroom with passionate impartiality (Holm 1975, Jackson 1982). This is a tall order given their own religious or a-religious belief, but it is a hallmark of good education and

training that can be achieved irrespective of faith background and none (McCreery 2004). Where else in primary and secondary schools would it be commonplace for a practising Muslim both to want to teach other faiths alongside Islam and to be allowed to?

This level of appreciation was made possible by the creation of a well qualified staffing base, with specialists in the individual religions, in applied fields of ethics, in each of the academic disciplines and with the relevant professional experience. Administrative re-organisation within the university, shifts in recruitment priorities and in government funding for humanities and teacher education entail inevitable change. There is now a question as to what will be taken forward for future generations of students. That question is one that deserves to be asked more widely: does the omission of teaching and research in Ethics and Religion from any university curriculum not leave a hole in its heart?

Act Four: the second Millennium—a continuing political itch

Ecumenical collaboration has mattered to me since school days. First it was between the Christian churches; as an undergraduate I was chair of the Joint Christian Societies Committee. Subsequently, it was with and between other religions as well. From its establishment in 1973 the RE Council of England and Wales (REC) has been my particular interest. It is predicated on the principle that RE is too important to be left to the ownership of individual religions, and too sensitive to be left to politicians. The REC membership comprises 50 national organisations—each of the main faith communities found in the UK, along with the British Humanist Association, plus each of the specialist academic and professional associations—teachers, lecturers, advisers and inspectors. Intermittently, I have served in its chairing in the 1980s and 1990s, latterly from 2003-11.

Throughout the REC's history, mutual understanding has been fundamental to its existence. Building on that, its main purposes have been to create a shared basis for the public provision of RE for every child and young person during their school years and to press government regarding the quantity and quality of that provision. Together with government agencies, the REC helped develop a *National Framework for RE* (England. QCA, 2004) which sets out agreed outcomes from RE which are considered relevant throughout the educational system 5-18.

In spite of rhetorical support from successive governments, there has been a mismatch with the reality of provision in many schools. Direct attention to RE and ME in teacher education and training has been variable, often even non-existent. Primary class teachers have sometimes lacked both competence and confidence and many secondary schools have been without specialists (Gates, 1993; REC, 2007; Ofsted 2010). Though examples abound of RE as well taught and popular, its presence is patchy. In two recent initiatives, the REC has moved to redress this.

One has been a month-long National Celebration of RE, with events held throughout England and Wales in schools, colleges and universities; cathedrals, mosques, synagogues and temples; libraries, town halls and the terrace of the House of Commons. The purpose has been to raise the profile of RE in public consciousness and there is evidence from media reporting that it has succeeded—visibly recorded at www.celebratingre.org.

The other has been a project specially funded by government to work with teachers in secondary schools (11-16) to develop strategies to build confidence in tackling the religious roots of violent extremism. Triggered by the post-9/11 and post-7/7 agendas, this has provided opportunity to identify what individual schools and their teachers actually need to become better equipped in both pedagogical skills and curriculum resources. The continuing website is www.resilience.org.

These initiatives were in place ahead of the election of the UK Coalition Government (May, 2010) but there is now strong anxiety regarding what actual support it will give to RE and ME in the context of economic cuts and policy devolution to schools. My fear is that the opportunity to build on tested experience will be missed and the potential relevance for deepening and broadening the contribution which RE and ME bring to young people's personal and political discernment ignored.

Modelled on the composition of the REC, I am now keen to develop over the next decade a continentally comprehensive website which will mirror electronically in each country a meeting point for all the key organisations at a national level with interests in RE and ME. With the help of small volunteer teams in every country, it will collate ready links to determining constitutional documents, demography, academic institutions, faith communities and learning resources. It will also create a special facility for children and

adults to engage directly in inter-religious dialogue across countries and cultures. Cumulatively, its vitality will be an itching reminder to politicians to give serious attention to religion and ethics throughout public education.

Act Five: my moral learning

Weaving my way personally, professionally and politically, I am aware of both continuity and change. My parental inheritance was of a Christian faith that is genuine, but undogmatic; certainly rooted in wonder at the natural world, ever curious, and aware of human generosity and suffering. Theology was and remains as much 'small t' and relating to deepest human concerns as it is 'big T' and interacting with doctrinal tradition. Challenges from historical scrutiny and scientific discovery keep coming, but I can welcome them since my reasoned trust is in truth.

The moral anguish I felt at injustices as a student has never diminished. It was there too in the notions of fairness, albeit in different forms of unpacking, which I found universally amongst children and young people and now confirmed in their adult thoughts. Reflecting on my professional life, I am inclined to think that I might have been able to do more to contribute to overcome injustices if I had chosen a different career. Then again, it was not shied from in my teaching.

Of course, I recognise the possibility that I may be deceiving myself; as a Buddhist might say, capacity for self-deception is an endemic human characteristic. My sense of moral 'oughtness' may be only a conditioned reflex induced like 'feeling clean' by habitual routine (Zhong *et al.*, 2010), but were that so the grounds for any moral or religious belief, along with any distinctively human meaning would disappear. The conviction that ethics matter involves just as much an act of faith and belief for the secular humanist as it does for the religious believer. For me, so far a sceptical perspective has not had the last word.

I also recognise the omnipresence of self-interest on the part of the individual and one magnified in the many uncritical collectivities of human belonging. There are limits to human perfectibility. To overcome this limitation I see 'collegial action', necessarily accompanied by critical realism, as a more strategic means of overcoming it than liberal exhortation or instruction. Building multi-perspectival political agency has therefore been

a priority in the university as also in a national organisation. Inter-subjective corroboration is the beginning and end of good ME and RE.

Epilogue: Nanjing and beyond

The *JME* held its 25th anniversary conference at the University College of St Martin in 1997: Morals for the Millennium. Over the intervening years the *JME* Editor, Board and Trustees, and I with them, have wanted its horizons to become very deliberately internationalised. As a result of personal and professional outreach and the building up of JME-supported regional links formalised in the Asia Pacific Network for Moral Education (APNME), the *JME*'s 40th anniversary conference will be held, with the Association for Moral Education (AME) and APNME, in Nanjing, China. There will now be the challenge for the *JME* and AME, as for me, to show that we can all learn from the strong Chinese tradition of ME, not just theoretically in the pages of *JME* but through dialogue with Chinese and other regional colleagues and in observations of practice. In turn, it is our shared hope that colleagues in China may come to welcome academic quality, research methods and ethical processes from ME in Europe, North America and elsewhere in the world. And it is my personal hope that the public model for RE in the UK might prompt questioning on the part of the Chinese authorities as to what can yet be learned regarding ME from the religious traditions which continue to flourish amongst its own people. This would involve a shared affirmation of the relative autonomy of ethics and of religion. Properly understood they are in a position of mutual check, and authentic human enrichment.

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