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Knowledge and religious education: a metalogue

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ABSTRACT

This article explores differing scholarly views on the relationship between knowledge and Religious Education (RE) within a British context. Using a metalogue methodology – a structured, reflective dialogue – the perspectives of three scholars are presented facilitated by a fourth scholar. The method preserves individual voices while fostering interactive debate. The discussion includes – disagreements on the nature and definition of knowledge and concerns over limited pedagogical vocabulary. There was a shared dislike of rote learning and the 'transmission' model of education, advocating instead for intellectual engagement, virtue ethics, and existential inquiry. The metalogue revealed differing views on whether RE uniquely holds responsibility for teaching ethical and existential themes, or if this should be interdisciplinary. Concerns about teacher education, lack of conceptual clarity, and the erosion of academic RE spaces in the UK were raised, thereby impacting ideological and pedagogical development. Despite disagreements, the scholars valued the metalogue as a respectful and productive format for dialogue, and agreed it could be used as model for classroom debate. Further implications include more focussed discussion and agreement on policy direction for RE goals, pedagogical innovation focused on scholarly curiosity and better teacher education that supports deeper educational purpose beyond knowledge delivery.

KEYWORDS

Metalogue; philosophical enquiry; religious education; knowledge; truth claims; virtue pedagogy

Introduction

There are diverse opinions concerning the relationship between Knowledge and religious education (RE), this article presents the perspectives of three notable scholars in the British context – Prof Michael Hand (M), Professor Trevor Cooling (T) and Dr Patricia Hannam (P).

We have endeavoured to highlight the complexity of these diverse perspectives by adopting a metalogue method of inquiry which retains the distinctive individual voices while also capturing the interactive debate between them, facilitated by a fourth scholar, Professor Sally Elton-Chalcraft (S). Metalogue is a technique used by a variety of academics in diverse contexts. One example of this methodology charts the reflective conversations between three US business management professors at the end of their careers, uncovering themes of not-knowing, relevance and relationships which emerged in their respective work and careers (Coghlan, Shani, and Bartunek 2025). In a contrasting example an early career scholar devotes an entire article to make visible the conversations between authors, editors and referees by using metalogue as a methodology to uncover the process of debate between different stakeholders in the production of a final product (Staller 2007).

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Our metalogue here sought to uncover the overlaps and disagreements between the three scholars drawing on the paragraphs they had each composed individually and circulated a few weeks prior to the metalogue session. Next the scholars were invited to comment on each others' standpoint through a group debate in an online teams meeting in March 2025, which lasted just over two hours with a fifteen minute break. Post metalogue the facilitator undertook an initial tidy up of the transcript and inserted thematic sub-headings. Each scholar was then invited to edit down their contributions while retaining the original essence. During a subsequent meeting the four scholars discussed the efficacy of the thematic headings and the edited text. This article therefore presents the edited, but verbatim debate, presented, as it unfolded, under the agreed thematic headings. The facilitator authored the methodological explanation and a brief conclusion which was endorsed by the three scholars. While initially hesitant (and possibly suspicious!) prior to the metalogue session, the three scholars enthusiastically engaged in challenging but respectful debate and considered the whole experience fruitful and enjoyable. We collaboratively agreed on the process at each stage, to guarantee equitable ownership.

Methodology- explanation of the process of metalogue

Our metalogue methodology exerted power over each scholar to listen intently to their peers and then articulate disagreements synchronously. This is an important point – it was the metalogue process itself, not the hegemonic influence of the facilitator, which exerted the power to enforce an egalitarian debate. The facilitator's role bears some resemblance to a non-participant focus group facilitator – proposing a few interjections to aid clarification, ensuring any gender discrimination was kept in check and generally creating a secure, enriching atmosphere for open debate. The facilitator undertook an initial tidying up correcting some amusing TEAM's generated transcriptions such as 'What are your hopes *Ferrari* [for RE] in the future?' So the heart of the article is the verbatim interchanges between the three scholars, in the same order in which they were articulated, and the scholars had complete ownership in the editing of their own contributions.

So our metalogue methodology allowed us to reach some conclusions and implications which, while summarised by the facilitator in the final section, were endorsed by all three scholars. While acknowledging that focus group data collection is multifarious there are some similarities between the ontological and epistemological nature of both metalogue and focus group approaches. In both metalogue and focus groups the individual is seen as a social being, as Kamberelis and Dimitriades point out when discussing focus groups:

> - 'the self is constantly working on itself – constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing itself in and by multiple discourses and social practices, their effects, and the way they intersect, transverse and challenge one another' therefore 'the "self" is always already the social'. (2013:5)

Another similarity with the focus group approach was to ensure the space for the debate was 'safe', 'familiar' and 'comfortable' (Kamberelis and Dimitriades 2013), using TEAMs online (with which all scholars were familiar), enabled us all to participate from the comfort of our own home/work office which ensured a relaxed context.

However our approach differs from a focus group in a number of ways – the presentation follows a different style to that of the traditional article where literature review and methodology sections are followed by analysis of the focus group with quotations from participants synthesised with analysis from the researcher who wields the power to decide which quotations will be included and which words will be omitted. In our metalogue the three scholars and the facilitator had absolute and equal ownership over content generation and editorial decisions and the production of the final product.

We collaboratively negotiated potential problems, one scholar was initially hesitant of the metalogue methodology, 'I'm not quite sure how this process works because I've never done anything like this before' and another admitted a degree of uncertainty '[I'm] not quite sure about

how we get to the final product'. Nevertheless at the end of the metalogue all three scholars agreed it had been a 'novel process and an interesting experience', which was 'nice because we found more overlaps'. Yet we were careful not to gloss over disputation, one scholar insisted there had been a 'requirement to step back from the other person's irritation and concentrate on the interface of disagreement, and, in the dispute something different emerges'.

In traditional academic discourse an argument in one journal article is refuted several months (or even years) later with counter replies appearing later still; such protracted disagreement necessarily encourages a more entrenched oppositional perspective. Whereas in our metalogue, while real disagreements were articulated and certainly not resolved, nevertheless there was an atmosphere of amicable agreeing to disagree and, at the end of the discussion, each scholar admitted to a deeper understanding of their 'opponent's' perspective while continuing to fundamentally disagree. We would suggest that our metalogue is reminiscent of successfully led debates in RE lessons, so the scholars were modelling dialogic rather than oppositional 'up against each other' perspectives.

So what follows is the verbatim interchange in the same order in which it was discussed grouped under the following themes/subheadings. The facilitator begins by inviting each scholar to 'set out their stall' presenting their individual perspectives of the place of knowledge in religious education with discussion of overlaps and disagreements. This led to a debate about the nature of RE; Eastern/Western, community and personal knowledge, universal and contentious claims about truth; interdisciplinary education and the idea of becoming better humans/learning virtue; knowledge transmission/generation and the concept of learning; finishing with the implications for education and hope for RE in the future.

The place of knowledge in religious education

M: The first thing I want to say is that I don't think knowledge transmission is the primary aim of religious education.

I do think it's a secondary aim. It's a secondary aim because we clearly do have lots of knowledge about religions, knowledge of religious practices and institutions and texts. And one of the things we're doing as religious educators is passing on that knowledge.
But it's not the primary aim because the questions of real interest in religious education are questions of religious truth. That is, claims about God, the soul, life after death, reincarnation, salvation, creation, etc. There is no knowledge in that domain. There is a multiplicity of truth claims, many of which have interesting and plausible arguments in their support, but none of which is so well supported by evidence and argument that we could classify it as knowledge. With respect to these religious questions, our aim as religious educators is to equip young people to think intelligently and critically about them, and to form their own considered views on them. It is not to impart knowledge of the answers, simply because there is no such knowledge available.

P: The place of knowledge in religious education has been discussed in the literature over many decades. However, to engage seriously with this question, we must first explore the nature of both education and religion.

Whilst we might agree there is a strong relationship between knowledge and education; this isn't a sufficient explanation for what education is and what it should do. The push towards knowledge leads to prioritising ontological and epistemological questions, omitting the existential, human nature of education. This has been hugely problematic for religious education with religious education scholars formulating awkward claims about what religion is and what it is to be religious. Ofsted has been instrumental in re-emphasising knowledge (substantive and disciplinary) in recent times. Introduction of the notion of 'personal knowledge' has brought new confusion and uncertainty. Is 'personal knowledge' even a kind of knowledge? Furthermore, emphasis on knowledge raises questions regarding 'whose knowledge'; requiring intersectional consideration. Knowledge-oriented questions, whilst very important, have served to skew the conversation about what religion

is. Assumptions made that religion is only about beliefs in the propositional sense, or about practices understood as resting on propositional beliefs. Religion comes to be equated precisely with 'beliefs' or practices alone; beliefs understood as a kind of knowledge. The existential aspect of religion, for example mysticism, goes missing. A knowledge focus means we don't really know how to bring this important aspect of religion into the classroom, except as observation. Currently we have an incomplete account of education, one incapable of allowing for a complete account of religion. An account of education incapable of being interested in the existential, of human (and non-human) existence in the world. That's me setting out my stall. Thank you.

T: I will approach this question by reflecting autobiographically on my experience of 50 years in education. In my teacher training we were told that knowledge is justified true belief. I understood that my job as a biology teacher was to pass on knowledge about, for example, photosynthesis. The thing that puzzled me was that knowledge about the natural world changes, and if it is justified true belief, I didn't understand how it could then go on to change. Later, my experience of the philosophy of science made me realise that quite a few philosophers did think knowledge changed.

Then I started teaching RE and my puzzle magnified because it is clear that a lot of what is taught in RE is not justified true belief. The relationship between what I was doing in the classroom and knowledge became even more confusing for me.
Then my PhD reading introduced me to the notion of worldview, and everything changed because it gave me a different way of thinking about knowledge. The essence of the worldview idea is that we are all, as human beings, embedded in ways of thinking and acting which radically affect how we interpret the information we receive and the significance that we give to it. The notion that nobody stands nowhere became very important for me.
This is not the same as saying that everybody has a religious type faith. What it is saying is that we all, as part of our humanity, cannot escape the fact that we are creatures of our own culture and our own way of being brought up. Charles Taylor calls these 'social imaginaries'. M Polanyi uses the term 'personal knowledge'. I now think that knowledge is better described as something like 'justifiable, held to be true belief'. In other words, it must be open to critical inquiry but is not necessarily proven.

Overlaps between the three positions

S: What would you say are the overlaps

T: I agree with M about the importance of critical inquiry rather than just passing on information. I also agree with P about the importance of the existential dimension, which I see as central in a worldview approach.

P: Yeah, two areas of agreement are that education isn't only about knowledge transmission and, that critical or scholarly, intellectual engagement with the material is important.

M: I really liked what P said at the start about the dominance of the knowledge agenda, the dominance of the idea that education is always fundamentally about getting kids to know stuff. I think that is unhelpful in a subject like RE. I also share her reservations about the category of personal knowledge, which seems either nonsense or at the very least poorly defined.

I think I mostly disagree with T, but I'm certainly comfortable with the idea that one of the kinds of knowledge that we teach in RE is the knowledge of how to be a good scholar.

Differences between the standpoints

S: What are the differences between your standpoints?

M: I don't think we can follow T down the line of knowledge as 'justifiable held-to-be-true belief' because that lets in way too much stuff. I might believe in the possibility of time travel or the existence of life on other planets. I might believe that the Labour Party will make a better job of managing the economy than the Conservative Party would. These are beliefs I may sincerely hold and for which I can produce good reasons – so they're justifiable. But it would be crazy to count them as knowledge. I don't know these things. They're just good guesses. We absolutely have to maintain the distinction between good guesses or informed opinions, on the one hand, and things we know, on the other. It would be disastrous for education if we were to lose sight of that central and important distinction.

S: T, do you want to come back on that and then we'll go on to P.

T: Can I ask a question of M? Is your view of knowledge, itself knowledge?

M: Do we know that knowledge is justified true belief?

T: Yes.

M: Fundamentally, yes, I think we know that knowledge is justified true belief – with maybe some fourth element. There's a famous paper by Edmund Gettier (2000/1963) which drew attention to some peculiar cases in which it is matter of luck that a justified belief is true. We may need some fourth condition that rules out luck, and philosophers disagree on what that might be. But yes, there is very broad consensus on justified true belief.

T: OK, so you've just made an empirical claim about the philosophy of knowledge. Yet, actually there are quite a few serious academics who don't hold that view, so presumably those people, like me, are in some sense not as rational as the likes of people who do think that justified true belief is what knowledge is.

M: I'm not sure where you're going with this, but let's say, for the sake of argument, that the definition of knowledge is contested.

T: I agree, it is contested. The contested view of knowledge that you are proposing is, I suggest based on presuppositions and beliefs about the nature of being human, firmly embedded in what I would call a rationalist tradition, which would be resonant with, for example, a humanist view of knowledge, but exclude those who might take a more religious, revelatory view of knowledge. What I am suggesting is that the view of knowledge that you advocate is embedded in a tradition, what I might call a worldview. It is not neutral or settled.

M: I don't know if that's true, but what I want to draw attention to is the fact that, in order to communicate with each other in the English language, we have to use words in something roughly like their ordinary sense. In ordinary language we routinely draw the distinction between things we know and things we're just making good guesses about. And something like that distinction has to be in place. Otherwise, the whole structure of our epistemic language starts to crumble.

T: Indeed, we need to identify what we do agree on and it's fine to call that knowledge. For example, we no doubt agree on how photosynthesis works. But that's not the only type of knowledge there is. I know that God loves me, even if other people don't agree with me. Of course, I must justify that belief, but it is not just a good guess! I know both these things.

I suggest the ordinary notion of knowledge is not fit for purpose because it leads us to believe that it is timeless and secure. My argument is that our knowledge is embedded in particular cultures and ways of looking at the world. If we aren't made aware of this, we easily impose what we regard as knowledge on other people. We see that happening all over the world.

S: Thanks. Can I bring P in?

P: This is a fascinating discussion. The 'Gettier' (Gettier 2000/1963) paper important to take into account. Justified true belief is not a sufficient account of knowledge, a fourth criteria necessary; the question being what that might be. What do we know? Are there different categories of knowledge, are there any settled facts, even scientific ones? I put to you, probably very few. So how do we come to live with uncertainty? The I'm point making is a point about the nature of religion and the place of knowledge and truth in religious education. In religious education uncertainty about plurality of knowledge/truth led some to postmodernism. But, to say 'truth is relative' is extremely tricky for those who are religious; for a variety of different reasons. Others in RE world insist religion is about Truth Claims, for example Andrew Wright, who investigates managing contradictory truth claims in the classroom. But this leads to epistemological and ontological debates rather than educational ones. Wright would agree with M, that engaging with truth critically is vital in the classroom. Wright moves to the epistemological theory of critical realism, popular in the social sciences, to handle this. But we could go to pragmatism, something I'm more familiar with. Either way, to follow an epistemological track through the knowledge journey forest leads to focussing on ontological and epistemological questions. This sidetracks us away from the nature of religion itself; taking us down an impossible, irresolvable path. There are more interesting and fruitful *educational* questions about the nature of religion for the world currently.

To pick up on T's point about human beingness, this can go missing in education altogether, if we take a pure knowledge journey.

What is the nature of RE ?

S: Is it problematic for RE teacher educators and teachers that RE experts can't agree?

M: I'm very much persuaded that one of the really interesting genres of argument for the truth of religion makes reference to our existential plight. So there's something about understanding how we stand in the world and our desire to make sense of our human experience in its entirety. Religion can be understood as one way of trying to answer those fundamental existential questions that we all face as human beings. That is quite consistent with my claim that RE is primarily concerned with questions of religious truth. We cannot engage with those questions unless we take seriously the sense in which religions offer answers to our existential situation in the world.

S: P do you want to come back on that?

T: Can I clarify, is the notion of knowledge which I see M and P holding the same? Is knowledge information we pass on?

M: There are various different kinds of propositional knowledge, or knowledge-that. But there's also procedural knowledge, or knowledge-how, which I take to be the kind of knowledge you endorsed, T, when you talked about how to be a scholar in RE. There's also knowledge by acquaintance. So there might be knowledge of God that is just direct acquaintance with the divine, which is neither propositional nor procedural. We have to recognise this multiplicity of kinds of knowledge.

M: When people talk about a 'knowledge-rich curriculum', I think they're principally talking about bodies of propositional knowledge. And I think those can indeed be transmitted.

T: P, is your view of knowledge the same as that?

P: So, to be blunt, Ofsted tends to mean bodies of knowledge that are transmissible. But this leads to a closed circuit. Let's take the example of GCSE. Kids must know 'X, Y or Z'. Teachers become facilitators of psychological processes in the classroom, which might be called 'learning', indeed might be called rote learning. Young people must spit this out in an exam, with the odd bit of 'making it look like a good argument'. However, these are usually other people's well-rehearsed arguments, not their own.

I take M's point about different kinds of knowledges; for example, playing the violin. There's a kind of knowledge that's in my body, meaning I can bring tunes out over and again without looking at the music. Somehow my whole body knows how to do that. It's not just locked up in my brain. There is also a sense of knowledge by association or acquaintance. I'd like to pursue that if we had time. What about intuition? Where does that fit? Or a sense of danger? Is that knowledge in my body or another human faculty.
When talking about the nature of religion, the question of knowledge is pertinent. How do we tease that apart? Not only what kind of knowledge it is, but who owns it. This is another whole kind of branch of stuff. What about your chosen way of life, how you exist in the world, is that knowledge? I'd like to ask whether he considers indigenous (e.g. Sami) sensibilities about how to treat 'the salmon' to be knowledge. I contest M's insistence that all religion is based on beliefs in a propositional sense.

T: I agree, the dominant view of knowledge in English education is that it is settled information to be passed on. When people talk about knowledge rich, they usually mean harder information or more information. I think we are agreed that there is more to knowledge than that. It appears that we all want to challenge that ordinary understanding of knowledge.

Eastern/Western/Community/Personal knowledge

P: Yeah, I have been thinking about this in preparation for our meeting. One way to think of personal knowledge is as 'what I personally know' - about myself or other things; what is mine in my personal 'knowledge bag' so to speak. But knowledge in the way I think has been used in religious traditions is a deeper, profound knowledge, about who I am, and that sometimes comes from outside oneself. From being with nature or through prayer or meditation. Is that the same kind of knowledge? Would M exclude or include?

M: In relation to whether intuitions and sensibilities and ways of life are knowledge, then I just want to say no. They might give us clues to knowledge. When we have an intuition about something, it's worth investigating and interrogating to see if it tells us something about the world. But the mere fact that we have intuitions and sensibilities and ways of life is not itself knowledge. That would stretch our understanding of knowledge too thin.

What about the dependence of practices on beliefs? I'm prepared to accept that the concept of prayer is elastic. There might be things people do which they call prayer but which don't imply the existence of an addressee. But, in the overwhelming majority of cases of prayer, one is praying to something, someone, some transcendent being, and one has to believe that such a being exists for prayer to be intelligible. The practice of prayer ordinarily depends on the belief that there exists someone who hears one's prayers, or to whom one's prayers are addressed.

S: Are the three of you talking within a Western tradition, or are you thinking about Eastern, personal knowledge is seeing the person as an individual? In many Eastern philosophies and belief systems there is the idea of community or social knowledge.

T: Personal knowledge is not the same as individual knowledge. Personal knowledge is the idea that you cannot separate knowledge from people, their environments, their communities and their shaping influences. Talk of personal knowledge as purely individual is, I think, quite Western. Whether the way we are talking is Western, well it's hard not to be because we three are Westerners! But that's the point – our knowledge is part of our cultural shaping. Seeking some purely rational, universal view of knowledge is impossible because standards are different in different cultures.

T: The Australian Aboriginal understanding of knowledge is very different from the European. The Australian education system struggles with that.

Universal claims about truth, contentious claims

M: The claims I want to make about what we're trying to do in religious education, and what the appropriate pedagogical constraints are, are intended to be universal claims. They're intended to apply as much in India or China as they are in the UK or the US. They are not predicated on an understanding of religion as Judeo-Christian religion. The thought is that all of these religious claims – about the transcendent, or the supernatural, or post-mortem existence, or whatever it is in whatever tradition – are contentious. And so the constraints under which we have to operate as educators are the same in any of these contexts. We can't teach stuff as if it were knowledge when it isn't.

T: The issue, M, is that you have just made a universal assertion that rests on a view of knowledge that derives from a particular rationalist worldview.

M: Sure, but that doesn't matter, because contentious claims about what we're trying to do in religious education are not claims we're trying to teach. They are not claims we want children to accept. It doesn't matter if claims about the content of and constraints on education are contentious. What matters is if the things we persuade children to believe are contentious.

T: I suggest it does matter. Your view of knowledge is contentious. True it may not be explicitly taught, but if it is treated as the normative framework within which religion is taught, then it is being imposed as settled fact.

M: Agreed. But the constraint I'm defending doesn't prohibit children's educational experience being shaped by contentious claims. It prohibits the teaching of contentious claims as true.

P: I would agree, education cannot be the kind of thing that presents contentious claims as true. That belongs in an authoritarian society, and we live in a democracy. However, I've two further questions. One in relation to prayer or meditation always having to be directed towards an external God. I suspect all three of us grew up within a western white Church of England or non-conformist background. God was presented as a kind father with a white beard and Jesus as a beautiful blue-eyed golden-haired young man. Although I grew up with that it is not my personal experience, which was more mystical. Is prayer always outwardly directed, or more inwardly experienced? I have Buddhist friends in the Tibetan tradition who would say they pray, not just meditate. However, they have no conception of a 'father' sort of God. I think about overlaps here with the Sufi tradition. Also, traditions emerging encounters between Eastern traditions and the Greek thought world

around 500CE. To say that prayer and meditation is always directed is essentialist. This takes us back to the nature of religion, and to existential ways of being religious and of simply being in and with the world. Not necessarily dependent on propositional beliefs.

A knowledge focus in RE risks omitting a huge area of what religion is, and what it is to be religious. Listening to M and T again raises educational questions about education's relationship to knowledge, limiting what can be included as rightfully part of education. Is education not also about the way human beings relate to one another and how we exist in the world?
Education is not only about handling complex truth claims. It's also about how we live. That's the synergy between religion and education which interests me. Interesting to explore therefore what education and RE should do, at this time in a democracy.

M: I did allow that the concept of prayer might be elastic, and I certainly wasn't trying to bundle it up with the concept of meditation. I was indeed raised Anglican, with an understanding of God along the lines you've described, P, but I was also an enthusiast for transcendental meditation as a teenager, and that was very much directed internally rather than externally. I don't think the practice of transcendental meditation rests on propositional belief in a transcendent being. And there may well be versions of prayer that don't require an addressee. I was simply saying that, in the ordinary sense of prayer than most of us understand, it is directed towards a transcendent being, and that only makes sense if there is such a being.

In relation to the broader aims of education, I agree. I think education is properly concerned with, for example, equipping young people to have healthy personal relationships and to participate in democratic society. I would like to see political education and relationships education feature much more prominently on the school curriculum.
It's not clear to me, though, that *RE* has much of a role to play in teaching the skills and sensibilities involved in being a good parent, or a good citizen, or a good employee, or whatever. The proper business of RE is the interrogation of religious truth claims.

T: M, let me try pushing you a bit on that one.

One of the scholarly attributes that is central to RE is being a good listener to another person's contrary point of view. That is what we're trying to do now. This involves certain interpersonal skills. You need to develop, for example, the ability to reflect back to another person what they've just said before you leap in and criticise it. There are virtues necessary in a world where people struggle to agree with each other and work together well. If we believe in the value of democracy, there are virtues to be developed through RE. That is integral to the knowledge being taught.

M: I'm definitely in favour of the idea that schools should teach listening and dialogue and self-control and relational skills. I'm co-edit a journal called *Journal of Philosophy in Schools*, and the Philosophy for Children movement is explicitly focused on cultivating these kinds of listening and dialogue skills in communities of inquiry. This is absolutely crucial stuff. But it's in no way specific to RE. These are skills we need in all domains of human inquiry. So of course I'm with you on the skills, but it would be very odd to say that cultivating them is the distinctive function of RE.

T: I am not arguing that this is a distinctive (by which I mean unique) feature of RE. But I do think it's integral to good RE.

P: So, another thing we agree on is that education should be dialogical, practising living together. Exploring ways to get along; disagreeing agreeably, changing our thoughts and actions.

Interdisciplinary education – becoming better humans/investigating virtue

P: You'll both know philosophical enquiry has occupied a large part of my career and not only in RE.

I'm now wondering if we might be arguing against separate subjects in schools, for more cross-subject teaching.

To be provocative, I'd want to follow this up a little bit, pointing out that several things we've discussed today are not exclusive to RE, or even as conceived as worldviews. A question: is there something distinctive about the nature of religion, that is important? I want to give you by way of an example if I may to illustrate something that's been puzzling me. It's something I'm writing now in relation to the teaching of Islam. How come after 30–40 years or more of teaching inclusive RE (Islam, for example) the incidence of anti-Muslim behaviour in our country is so high? This is confusing, isn't it? When people have information, how come it hasn't transformed how people behave?

The recent Dinner Table Prejudice report (Jones and Unsworth 2025) showed that Islam was the one religion people from all social classes feel able to express incomplete opinions. About. I've been thinking that rather than approaching RE through assuming religion is about truth claims, which is oppositional, how would it be to start by thinking about human experience?

A Muslim who's praying five times a day will recite the opening verses of Quran several times a day, beginning 'Bismillah Rahman ya rahim' (بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ) meaning 'In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful'. How would it be if we opened a sequence of lessons, primary or secondary, with an exploration of our experience of 'compassion', not necessarily as a religious manifestation, but as something human beings seem capable of. Later the teacher can introduce compassion as very much at the heart of what it is to live life as a Muslim. It would also lend itself to looking at compassion as the heart of many Buddhist traditions.

What is important here, is starting from the existential position is educational. Starting from human experience of existing as a human being in the world enables religion to be brought to the classroom as itself (not only as an object to be studied from afar). After experience comes intellectual encounter, and after all that, we ask children, 'well, why does this matter?' Why might it matter to us in our classroom, in our town; as a species on the planet that human beings have capacity for compassion. So yeah, I think I've started to spell out an existential RE. Knowledge is important, but it is not the starting point nor the end point, educationally.

T: Reflection on human experience is very important. The worldview approach is trying to promote reflection on how people respond to that. Why do we interpret our experience in the way we do?

I am more sceptical about the universality of virtues like compassion, because I think we've just got to read the news and we can see that compassion is not built into some religious traditions; it's definitely not built into much of the politics that we're seeing now. I suggest we kid ourselves if we think that religion is always a bastion of virtue.

Rather as democratically committed educators, we are asserting compassion as a virtue. We know that compassion is a good thing, but that is not universally accepted.

M: Yes, I had that initial thought as well. If I wanted examples of compassion in the world, I don't know that I'd go to religion as my first port of call. There are so many examples of religious people exhibiting a horrific lack of compassion.

But a more considered answer is this. I would love to see philosophy on the school curriculum, but it isn't there. Happily, we've managed to squeeze some in, surreptitiously, under the guise of RE. Perhaps we can do something similar with what you call 'the common experience of humanity'. I would love us to attend in schools, in a much more meaningful way than we do now, to our existential plight as human beings, and if we can squeeze that in under the banner of RE, fantastic. Let's do it. I do think it's cheating, though. I'd prefer to have existential inquiry as a curriculum subject in its own right, because I don't want young people to think that religion has any kind of monopoly on these common human experiences or existential concerns. My worry about smuggling them in under the heading of RE is that it religifies them, which is also my worry about smuggling in philosophy under that heading. I realise I've just made up the word religify.

P: Loving it.

M: But that's my worry. It's not that I disagree with your what you're proposing, P. It's just that I'd sooner we didn't do it in RE.

P: So, another thing we agree is that Education is the kind of thing that includes profound considerations. Education is the kind of thing that includes consideration of our plight, of what it is to be human, and not only knowledge transmission.

M: Education in general, you mean?

P: Yes, especially at this point in history where we're facing climate crisis, and ecological collapse. Goodness knows what's coming for our children and grandchildren. We shouldn't have to continue smuggling the existential through philosophy or RE or even English literature it or art. These are sites of application for profound explorations of our human existence. However what *education is* includes this.

M: I guess autobiography is not worth much in these discussions, but as an autobiographical point for me, it was English literature where we did this. It was reading Shakespeare and Dickens and Austen. That's where I got into the human condition and its complexities and its ambiguities and its internal contradictions. I never did that in RE.

P: Agreed. It was an English teacher, where we read Shakespeare. We experienced it, took it into our hearts. RE was dire, Paul's journeys; a geography lesson.

Education as knowledge consumption/transmission/generation and the concept of learning

S: It is interesting that we're moving in this conversation from *knowledge in RE* to *what is the point of education?* and how the curriculum is organised, and P's idea of what it is to be human, rather than education in terms of learning or consuming knowledge. In the capitalist ideology are human beings consumers rather than contributors towards culture?

P: Just the point. Yeah, not *just* the point, it's what education is. Sorry, T. I didn't mean to talk over you.

T: One of the things that I like about having been involved in church school education over many years is that these questions are asked. What I see happening in a lot of the governmental thinking is more about consumption of knowledge rather than what I would call learning to generate knowledge. For me, that's a debasing of education. That is a cross curricular question. It's not just an RE thing.

P: So, we agree education is the kind of thing concerned with our plight. Of being human.

M: I have just a small comment on what T was saying. I think at one point you proposed a shift from the language of knowledge *acquisition* or *transmission* to the language of knowledge *generation*. I wonder whether that's helpful, because it retains the idea that educators are solely or primarily concerned with knowledge. I think it would be helpful to move away from the idea that we have to be knowledge-focused in our educational endeavours. Some of our endeavours aren't about knowledge at all.

T: I think that depends on your view of knowledge. I wonder whether we're accepting too narrow an understanding of the idea of knowledge, because knowledge about yourself, knowledge how, and so on are all, (in my book), knowledge.

M: But, for example, if one of the things we're doing is encouraging children to stare into the abyss for a minute, to realise their existential predicament in the world, our concern is not with knowledge at all. We're not presenting them with an answer to the question of existence, nor helping them construct an answer of their own. Coming to an appreciation of the human predicament is not a matter of coming to know something.

T: OK, that's interesting. So why would that not be knowledge? Pupils learning that life is more than answers, that we need to stand back and reflect – is that not gaining knowledge?

M: I mean, it's not knowledge in any conventional sense. We'd have to stretch the notion of knowledge very wide and I don't know why we'd want to do that. Why hold on to the idea that everything we're doing is knowledge-focused? Might it not be the case that some of the things we want to teach, some of the questions we want to raise and help children think about, don't qualify as knowledge?

T: I'm just puzzled by why you want to restrict knowledge to what I regard as a limited and limiting conception.

P: So one thing we can do is to stretch the notion of what knowledge is.

In our time, it is matters to work it out 'where I am'. I don't mean where I stand physically, I'm not looking for a GPS location. I'm thinking that when someone calls to me. Who am I in this world as a human being that matters? This is not a matter of 'learning' or 'knowledge' in any kind of conventional sense.
A problem for those educated in a Western consumptive mindset is that humanity has been cut away from the world. Simone Weil in Weil (2023)*The need for roots* writes about how education cut us off from our roots. This kind of education exported all over the world, since colonial, industrial times. A more indigenous way of experiencing what it is to be human in the world is not perfect, but more interconnected, experiencing being human as part of nature, part of all that is. To recover something of this seems vital, if we're not as a species to cease to exist sooner than later, taking down a lot of other species with us.

T: P, I think you're talking about is what I would call personal knowledge. It's not just encountering stuff out there; it's also about how we respond to it.

The Aboriginal way of existing in the world is very different from the Western way.
And yes, I would still want to say they have knowledge that they are acting on in their response to the information they are receiving from their environment.

M: A couple of thoughts. One is purely pragmatic. Even if we four were to agree to T's very expanded conception of knowledge, it seems unlikely that the rest of the world is going to understand what we're talking about. If we continue to use the term 'knowledge', it will be very widely understood, not least by education policy makers, as conventional propositional knowledge of the kind that can be transmitted. So we might win the battle for a broader conception of education faster if we say it's not just about knowledge than if we say it is just about knowledge but in an expanded sense.

The other thought is more philosophical. I do think knowledge represents some kind of *achievement* or *mastery*. We know a fact when we have successfully justified a proposition. We know how to do something when we have successfully mastered a skill. But the kinds of learning we're talking about

now don't seem to involve achieving or mastering anything. We're still in the space of the unknown, the space of questions, of wondering what it's all about. Sticking a knowledge label on that carries an implication of achievement that we don't want here.

T: Again, I would say that's a particular conception. The word mastery is one that bothers me in relation to knowledge, because I think that it conveys a particular sense of what it is to be a human being, namely that being in control (dominant perhaps) is what knowledge is also about. But maybe knowledge should lead to humility? Mastery has the feel of an implied anthropology.

P: Well, if I was asked where I sit on this continuum, I would say that to continue to use the word knowledge is part of the Western hegemonic, and would go to different philosophers, to support that view. Just stretching the Western concept of knowledge to accommodate something different is not enough. Indigeneity is more likely look at it from the other way round, starting from interconnectedness and existence.

Part of our problem in English is that we are short of words when it comes to speaking about education and perhaps also knowledge.
We need a more precise, nuanced and subtle language. Lovely to make up new words, perhaps sometimes.

M: I'll just express a slight discomfort with the couching of this in geographical terms, as if it's an East-West thing. I don't agree that we lack language for these matters in the West. For example, I think the language of existentialism is very helpful and it's primarily Western.

The problem is not that we don't have ways of thinking and talking about the human predicament within the language of Western culture. It's that for some reason we don't centralise those ways of thinking and talking in the school curriculum. We centralise the areas in which we have established bodies of settled knowledge that are apt for transmission.

Implications for RE educationists; and the concept of learning

S: I think I think you're probably right, M, it's not helpful to have this binary of Eastern and western. If we consider concepts or ideologies, for example Ubuntu from the African continent, *I am because we are*, and *ahimsa*, the Indian concept of non violence, do you think RE is a good place for those sorts of things to be discussed? Also what is the perspective of teachers and teacher educators?

M: You're quite right to drag us back to RE, S, because we have indulged ourselves by talking about everything that's wrong with education in the round! And, as I've said, I'm uneasy about saddling RE with all of this stuff we wish the rest of education was doing properly, but isn't.

P: Perhaps we should unpack the word, learning a little bit more.

Replacing me as a human being – with me as a learner is a problem since learning isn't all that I do as a human being, even in school. It objectifies me. But let's open that up for further exploration – what do we mean by learning. Maybe I've got too narrow a conception. Learning to my mind implies repetition; more like training.

T: Oh no. That's why it's a different word.

P: Yeah, I just see it as a much closer idea.

T: For me, learning is the heart of being a human being.

And the way in which we learn is very diverse.

It is not just working for exams, it's much bigger than that, so I've never really understood your objection to the word learning.

S: P is incredibly familiar with Biesta's work (Biesta 2022) and he talks about Learnification and Subjectification. In subjectification the person is at the centre of their education rather than their learning. It's more of an overarching idea of what education is trying to be and trying to do. I think the words are so powerful and can be used as either weapons or helpful tools.

P: It strikes me there is danger in this for teachers also. Where teaching overlaps with learning, certain methods are utilised to facilitate 'learning' (of knowledge). The popular view is that this means applying psychological methods to 'enable' children remember said knowledge.

Now that's problematic, since all human beings and all children are distinct and different in the sense of uniqueness.
I become increasingly interested in neurological diversity; we are all neurologically divergent. There is no norm precisely. But that isn't what happens in most classrooms. The same methods are applied to all children. Those that fall out have got the problem. In reality, the problem was our starting point. When learning replaces education, uniqueness is at risk.

M: This is very puzzling to me. I was challenged by T's attempt to reformulate 'knowledge' because I really want to hold on to the distinction between knowledge and opinion, or knowledge and guessing. I feel the same about the move you're making here, P, because I think we're going to lose any sense of what education is if we give up the word 'learning'. In my view, teaching just is the facilitation of learning; education just is the systematic attempt to bring about the learning children need.

Note that learning is tremendously broad. There are many different kinds of learning, of which acquiring propositional knowledge is just one. We learn to appreciate. We learn to think, to feel, to speak. We learn how to behave and how to do things. At the same time, there are many changes people go through that are *not* learning. When we're sick, we go to a doctor and they make us better. We are changed by medical treatment, but that isn't a process of learning. In order to hold on to the notion of what education is, and what we're doing as teachers, I think we have to keep learning central. Otherwise I don't know how we'd distinguish education from everything else in the world.

T: So yes, I find myself agreeing with M on this one.

M: Oh my gosh, something's gone horribly wrong, T!

T: Yes, because for me to talk about education and to remove the language of learning just doesn't make sense because, for me, the heart of what teachers do is to help children to learn.

Incidentally, M, I do agree with the difference between knowledge and guessing, because justification is important. It's not just wild guessing or believe anything you like. It's got to entail critical inquiry. I would describe what I am advocating as learning to make wise judgements, not guessing or simply offering an opinion.

P: So let's get some logical distinctions here. *Sometimes* there are *some things* that a teacher sees as the next step for the child. Let's look to mathematics as an example. 2x2 = 4; $3 \times 2 = 6$ etc etc. There are ways we can help each child remember times-tables and have immediate recall, you know, $7 \times 7 = 49$. I don't have to go through the seven times table to know that. I did that job when I was young, it's stuck in there. Likewise with playing a musical instrument there are things I learned that mean I play more efficiently, I was helped along that way by music teachers who said, you know, hold your violin like this and not like this; although there are people that hold it like this and play perfectly well. But you know, there are also things we can best learn for ourselves. For example, gardening. There

are things we best learn by trial and error. But sometimes things surprise you, sometimes things come from outside that were unexpected that enable one to move forward in life.

What I am saying is that not all teaching is about foreseeing what the learning outcome is for the child. Sometimes the teacher's job is to create conditions where something else can happen, where surprising, unexpected things can happen. I could say the teacher's job is not always or even not usually about 'facilitating learning'. Sometimes it is and I've given you some examples. BUT sometimes the teacher's job is to create the conditions where education can happen. Education is not the same learning. Learning happens all the time, doesn't always need a teacher. Education is something else – learning maybe, plus many other things.
Sometimes surprising things happen. A child is not only a 'learner' a child is a human being.

M: The point is not that *being human* is only about learning. It's that *education* is only about learning. There are lots of important things in life that aren't education. But when we set about educating someone, when we care about a person's education, what we care about is their learning. It's not supposed to be an exhaustive account of the human condition. It's supposed to be an exhaustive account of the enterprise of education.

P: You're saying learning is an overlapping concept with education?

M: I would say the concept of education and the concept of teaching are *wholly dependent* on the concept of learning. Learning is what gives education and teaching their raison d'etre. Of course, lots of learning happens apart from teaching and educating, but it's because we think learning is a good thing that we have a whole set of institutions and practices designed to promote it.

Perhaps the problem here is an unduly narrow conception of learning. Learning is not only the incremental acquisition of technical skills. Surprises and epiphanies are instances of learning. We learn things through play: lots of early education is facilitation of play, because children learn by playing with physical objects and with each other. We should not equate learning with the didactic, step-by-step, incremental measures involved in teaching a musical instrument. That's just one kind of learning facilitation. But there are so many other kinds.

S: What is the consequence of everything that we've been talking about for the teacher educator and the teacher? In the English context there is a recommendation of what you should teach, and how you should go about teaching. What advice would you give the teacher educator, and teacher?

T: I think it's very important that teachers ask themselves the question what they understand by knowledge. One of the issues now is that teachers think knowledge is just information and that education is all about the transmission of information.

If it moves into long-term memory and can be recalled and reproduced when required in an assessment exercise, that's what knowledge is!

M: I think I want to say the exact same thing as T, but using completely different language! We don't get there by asking teachers to question what knowledge is. We get there by asking them to question whether RE is fundamentally about knowledge. And I would say the breakthrough is to realise that RE is not primarily a knowledge-based subject. It's a question-based subject.

What we want to do is open up these questions and invite critical inquiry into these questions, and not worry about bodies of knowledge, because that isn't what we're interested in.

T: That's very interesting because in many ways I agree and I see the worldview approach as aspiring to that, but this is also where we fundamentally disagree! I hear you as saying that religion does not give access to knowledge. I would say you are, therefore, initiating students and teachers into

a conception of religion and its role in human life, which is demeaning. That is what I experienced in my teacher training in the early 1970s.

P: This beautifully takes us back to our opening. Having reached quite a lot of convergence in some areas during our conversation, I'd want to look at teacher education more seriously. In other countries teacher education systems, time is given to exploring what education is. This is vital in educating those planning to teach RE. There should be more space to explore what religion is also. I think had that been undertaken more expansively in CoRE, the journey to worldviews would not have been necessary. This only added another layer of complexity for teachers, it's resulted in a return to knowledge, to disciplines and epistemology and ontological conundrums.

Consequent probably also because we haven't got a big enough vocabulary to talk about education in England.
In Germany and Germanic influenced countries, there is rich vocabulary. I'm not saying education is any better in Germany nor is RE less problematic. RE has its own problems in Germany for different historical reasons.
But there is a much more beautiful and interesting educational vocabulary.
Ideas about education that are absent in England where teacher education is too brief and too controlled by the CCF.A 7–8-month PGCE with all government requirements gives limited time. In academy chains teacher educators may have had limited exposure to philosophical and theoretical educational research.

S: In Germany they have *Buildung* and *Erziehung* and using that vocabulary widens a teacher educator's and teacher's understanding. Words can help broaden our understanding. So is it problematic for RE teacher educators and teachers that RE experts like yourselves don't agree?

M: Yes.

T: Why is it problem? People not agreeing is just part of human life. RE teachers should model doing that well!

Modelling how to find a level of agreement in the midst of what looked like fundamental disagreement is very important, and that's one of the things that I've loved about my life in RE and in this metalogue.
So I don't see disagreement as problematic.

M: Look, I love disagreement. I'm a professional philosopher and all we do is disagree. I'm not down on people disagreeing about things.

But I think it *is* a problem that there's such intellectual disarray about what we're trying to do in RE, about why it's on the curriculum and what its purposes are. It must be completely bewildering for new teachers coming into the field trying to figure out what their job is. I wish there was a bit more clarity and consensus. It's not that I want one narrow track that everybody follows. Of course I want healthy debate. But I think there's a happy medium between complete disarray on the one hand and a narrow track on the other. We need some broad agreement about the enterprise, even if we disagree about some of the finer points.
Some broad agreement on the nature and purpose of RE would be tremendously helpful for teacher educators preparing new teachers in the profession.

T: There is a national content standard now out there which, just to be provocative, is designed for exactly what you're advocating M.

P: Well, I'm sort of stunned. I have heard new things from both M and T. During my lifetime in RE we've lost great research centres such as Warwick and Kings. There's been something of an

intellectual collapse in RE. Ofsted stepped into the vacuum and that is dangerous in a democracy. It is outrageous that Ofsted has been instrumental in advancing government policy rather than operating at arm's length as it should. Ofsted has been advancing a particular educational position This has been hugely powerful and influential; if schools don't do as they're told consequences for the school are grave

This has put people in the position of being too scared to step outside the prevailing view. The RE world didn't stand up to that; rather the opposite – it went along with it. Furthermore, discernment about research is also a problem, things passing as research which are not well undertaken. A level of criticality is missing in the teaching profession. I see teachers of infants, in classrooms not far from where I live, saying, oh, right, now we're going to put our sociological lenses on. Now we're going to do theology. And it's not. It's neither sociology nor theology. And with due respect teachers are ill-informed about the difference between sociology and theology, assuming essential distinctions that don't exist. Perhaps critical engagement is so low currently that the subject might be lost altogether.

What are the hopes for RE in the future

S: What are your hopes for RE in the future?

M: I guess I would go back to my starting point. I'd love it if we could boldly and collectively agree that RE does have a central aim, which is to equip young people to navigate their way through religious questions and traditions and ideas in an intelligent way, by giving them the skills and resources to come to their own considered views on the big religious questions. I think that's the heart of what RE is. It is wrestling in a critical and informed way with religious questions. I think if we could bring that centre stage and achieve some level of consensus on it, that would be fantastic for the discipline and, more importantly, it would give young people the skills they need to manage their religious lives.**T**: I agree with M. To me that means that the knowledge involved in RE is learning how to be a good scholar in this field and to come awayexcited and inspired by that task.

P: Broadly, I would agree, but with the addition that all this this emphasises the need for well qualified and educated teachers of religious education. Teachers to be better able to articulate what education is, to see each unique child before them, and have considered more carefully and broadly what religion is and what can be to live a religious life.

Conclusion

As facilitator I have drawn out the following conclusions and implications from the metalogue:

The exercise itself could be seen as a model for debate, undertaken in a secure environment where everyone feels comfortable to engage in respectful, non-confrontational, equitable dialogue coupled with attentive listening, with the facilitator taking a non-hierarchical role but intervening to keep equitable interaction and raising relevant issues.

Despite not reaching total agreement, some common ground emerged- that education should move from the closed circuit of mere knowledge transmission, rote learning and knowledge consumption, towards intellectual engagement with knowledge and how to be a good scholar; coupled with a serious engagement with virtue ethics and our existential plight as human beings. Thus the RE educationalist's role is to equip students to intelligently interact with knowledge from an informed position which would probably more successfully raise exam results as a by product thereby making redundant the loathsome transmission/consumption model of teaching to the test, while also engaging students in fruitful investigation into the existential dimension of being human.

While agreeing that the definition of knowledge is contested there was disagreement about 'is justifiable true belief knowledge'? Gettier (2000/1963). Problems identified included the inadequacy of a shared vocabulary and many people's inability to live with uncertainty. Thus RE teachers could emphasise these limitations in their facilitation of contentious discussions, in addition students could explore Eastern, community and other understandings of belief and knowledge to counteract the more prevalent and dominant Western and individual standpoints while acknowledging the simplistic nature of an Eastern/Western binary perspective, and the prohibition of teaching contentious claims as true.

Scholars debated whether RE is more than assessing the validity of truth claims. We discussed the extent to which RE has an exclusive monopoly on- students investigating virtue ethics, how humans relate to each other, and our place in the world. Again, like our scholars, RE educationalists may disagree with each other about whether teaching about compassion should fall solely to the subject of RE or be interdisciplinary. One scholar felt that smuggling existential concerns under the heading of RE 'religifies' such an enquiry. The implication of such discussions calls for educationalists to frame RE within the wider context of education as a whole.

Scholars also disagreed about personal knowledge, propositional knowledge and mastery/achievement of knowledge returning to the debate concerning the lack of vocabulary. The use of terms such as 'learnification' as opposed to 'subjectification' outlined in Biesta's work (Biesta 2022) caused ideological controversy. This has implications for RE educationalists who may be tethered to narrow conceptions of education (learnification) thereby neglecting the wider understanding of seeing RE not as a knowledge-based but rather a question-based subject, yet on the other hand one scholar decried the uncoupling of knowledge and religion. Perhaps the problem arises because of a paucity of vocabulary and a technicist emphasis in teacher education and content driven RE in schools. Pedagogy in the UK has a limited vocabulary and is under theorised, compared with, for example, Germany's *Buildung* and *Erziehung* (Biesta 2022). There was even disagreement between our scholars about whether ideological disagreements were to be seen as problematic for an RE educationalist. We noted the loss of RE research centres throughout the UK, and the proliferation of governmental policies resulting in an intellectual collapse in RE which impedes debate about ideological disagreements. Nevertheless, drawing on some points raised in the metalogue my own hopes for the RE community include:

- Policy initiative – to collectively strive to agree on some aims for RE which equip students with skills and resources enabling them to come to their own considered views on the big religious questions.
- Pedagogic development – to feel excited and inspired by learning how to be a good scholar
- Structural and ideological development – to address the need for well qualified and educated teachers of religious education who can articulate what education is, and see each unique child before them, and carefully consider what it is to live a religious life.

The metalogue features four scholars discussing different viewpoints, yet sharing a common goal: to explore the most suitable methods for Religious Education (RE) pedagogy and practice to effectively support pupils.

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