Faith dialogue as a pedagogy for a post secular religious education

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Mike Castelli*

School of Education, University of Roehampton, London, UK

Inter-faith or inter-religious dialogue takes place for a range of reasons and comes in many guises, from the reconciliatory encounter to ease rivalry, to an engagement with the other in an exploration of the meaning and purpose of the human condition. This article examines the process of dialogue in a religious education context and proposes a dialogue that it is not simply a cordial meeting or the development of sympathetic knowledge and understanding of another's beliefs but a dialogue that entails the recognition of *self* facing *the other* eliciting a willingness to be drawn out of the protective defence of *the same* into what de Certeau calls 'the never-ending, yet life-giving journey which makes faith credible.' In such encounters there is always a risk, a risk of assimilation into sameness through self-effacement or domination. Dialogue in this positional article entails the exploration of the relationship which the space between self and other reveals and supports. This article wishes to explore faith dialogue, not only between peoples of religious faith, but also to include those for whom faith is what Fowler calls a 'human faith,' a faith outside any religious tradition. In contemporary Western society young people witness the encounter between religion, agnosticism and atheism in global and local contexts where such encounters are often confrontational and imply a desire for domination or even annihilation. A religious education faith dialogue pedagogy proposes the development of skills and attitudes that teach pupils how to respond to beliefs different from of their own while developing an articulation of their own.

Keywords: inter-faith dialogue; religious education; pedagogy

The scene is a Year 9 religious education lesson, involving pupils aged 13–14 years, in a London classroom. The student-teacher is narrating the life of Guru Nanak. One pupil responds to the account of Guru Nanak's disappearance in the river for three days by; 'That's stupid.' This is a vignette of some of the challenges facing contemporary religious education well beyond the boundaries of London, where a pupil of a European culture that privileges scientific knowledge is also having to deal with the fundamentalist voice that claims all sacredtext as truth; where the Sikh member of this Year 9 class feels uncomfortable with the context in which this story of Guru Nanak Sahib is being explored; where a student-teacher is grappling with a pluralist paradigm (Hick and Knitter 1987) that posits all religions are basically on equally valid paths to the same transcendent, a pluralism which has already accepted a version of 'religion' as marginal to the public realm and encourages little more than well-intentioned exhortations

*Email: m.castelli@roehampton.ac.uk

to a bland tolerance (Barnes 2010). 'That's stupid' may well express frustration from several quarters of the classroom; frustration from the pupil whose inadequate religious vocabulary makes it difficult for her to interrogate the text in question in a manner that seeks understanding of another's beliefs and practices while also challenging her own presuppositions and assumptions; frustration from the Sikh member of the class who feels the account of her religious tradition given in the classroom fails to reflect the sacred, affirmative and inclusive experiences she has of her own Sikh tradition; frustration from the student-teacher who understands the useful and affirmative reasoning of the pluralist paradigm but is also aware of the frustration of his Sikh pupil and her co-religionists and the inadequacy of tolerance as a response.

The attentive, thoughtful and respectful atmosphere in the classroom persuades the observer that the manner and language of the pupil's response to this event in Guru Nanak's life is not intended to be offensive. The pupil's apparently dismissive retort is more a reflection of her inability to engage with this event in Guru Nanak's life in a manner that might invite a response from her Sikh colleague. Were such an encounter to take place, opportunities for growth in knowledge and understanding, for both parties in the exchange, may present themselves. The enquirer first needs to seek the language of respectful, though possibly challenging, enquiry and the believer to find a willingness to put herself in the space where she can see herself from the other's point of view. 'That's stupid!' is not an articulate religious literacy that adequately expresses an interest in the believer's understanding, nor is it an invitation to dialogue. A more skilled, religiously literate response might have been; 'I find this event in Guru Nanak's life difficult to accept or understand. Should I take these events as historical fact and believe that Guru Nanak literally spent three days under water or is there a meaning behind the story that is symbolic, mythic or mystical?' When the enquirer is able to frame such questions for the believer, she finds herself in an encounter which reveals a 'relational' space between the enquirer and the believer, between self and the other, which can initiate a dialectic between self and other-than-self (Ricoeur 1992), where the to-ing and fro-ing promote articulation, reflection and challenge. This space is the where dialogue is possible. This article will examine the nature of dialogue as a tool for classroom learning, its usefulness in the religious education classroom, its links with the development of inter-faith dialogue and the nature of faith itself. In doing so, the article will propose an argument for faith dialogue as an inclusive and effective pedagogy for contemporary religious education.

Teaching pupils the skills of engaging with difference offers an alternative to confrontation or toleration. As children of an English society where much is adversarial from its legal system, its politics, its media reporting or its sports, the pupil in the classroom does not necessarily acquire skills of dialogue naturally. Alexander (2006) makes it clear that dialogue is more purposeful and disciplined than mere conversation:

> Dialogue requires a willingness and skill to engage with minds, ideas and ways of thinking other than our own; it involves the ability to question, listen, reflect, reason, explain, speculate and explore ideas; to analyse problems, form hypotheses and develop solutions; to discuss argue, examine evidence, defend, probe, and assess arguments. (5)

Alexander recognises that when such practices permeate the classroom there are social and moral consequences as 'dialogue within the classroom lays the foundation not just of successful learning, but also of social cohesion, active citizenship and good society.' (2006, 5) Within the religious education classroom the skills of dialogue not only promote understanding but also develop each participant's ability to articulate her own belief or explain her own practice in dialogue with another. Such a proposed dialogue is dynamic in Ricoeur's (1992) dialectical sense as self is revealed through the encounter with other-than-self. The awareness of self, the ability to articulate something of this awareness to others and the ability to respond to others sufficiently to be able to seek clarification, articulate difference and formulate challenge is a dialectic that clarifies and refines perceptions of self and other. 'That's stupid' is more adversarial and confrontational than dialogical and dialectic. Bauman's (1996, 26) image of culture as a 'jamming session' has much in common with the dialogical classroom. When jamming a musician hears, interprets and responds to the other participants in the session. In responding the participant may challenge and change the direction of the music but remains a participant, sometimes solo and other times in polyphony. In a dialogical religious education 'that's stupid' in non-participatory, inarticulate, closed to development and inimical to dialogue.

The study of world religions has been central to religious education in the UK since the latter half of the twentieth century and was exemplified in the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education in 1975 where the introduction of the study of religions, in addition to Christianity, acknowledged the changing religious make-up of the English classroom. Alongside this change in the classroom, inter-religious engagement had been taking place as a response to two world wars and the role religions had played in such international confrontations. The formation of the Christian World Council of Churches in 1948 sought initially peaceful coexistence and cooperation and from these encounters came a growing articulation of common understandings and respectful differences and there followed a growing relationship between religions across the world as reflected in the New Delhi Report (World Council of Churches 1961) and the San Antonio Document (World Council of Churches 1986). Such positive outcomes are only one side of the engagement between religions. There has also been dystopic relationship between religions where rivalry and violence has been frequent and a growth of fundamentalism and religious terrorism common. Despite the expectations that in a postmodern, secular society religion would become a private affair outside the public square, religion persists in public life in a range of forms. As Habermas notes: 'Today, public consciousness in Europe can be described in terms of a "post-secular society" to the extent that at present it still has to "adjust itself to the continued existence of religious communities in an increasingly secularized environment."' (Habermas 2008). Whatever the position taken on the contested notion of a post-secular society, the religious education classroom cannot ignore tensions within and between religions and between religion and a secularist view of the world if one of the tasks of education is helping young people understand themselves and the world they inhabit. Habermas (2008) believes that it is important to the well being of the whole of society that the secular and religious engage with each other:

If we henceforth adopt the perspective of participants, however, we face a quite different, namely normative, question: How should we see ourselves as members of a post-secular society and what must we reciprocally expect from one another in order to ensure that in

firmly entrenched nation sates, social relations remain civil despite the growth of a plurality of cultures and religious worldviews? (4)

It is the argument of this positional article that the skills of faith dialogue can make a contribution to social inclusion and civic well being.

The Christian theology of religions, in exploring inter-faith dialogue (Barnes 2002; D'Costa 1986; Dupuis 1997) has addressed the three-fold paradigm of exclusivism, inclusivism, or pluralism, where exclusivism privileges one's own tradition against all others, inclusivism judges other traditions as lesser or partial versions of what is realised only in one and pluralism argues for the relativising of all traditions including one's own. This paradigm can be a useful tool in the examination of self-understanding and self-criticism in inter-faith encounter, but Barnes (2002) argues, this paradigm only serves a minority agenda:

> My major objection to this 'paradigm approach' to theology of religions is that it tends to serve the intentions of the pluralist agenda only.....The so-called 'exclusivist' and 'inclusivist' are soon given the status of preliminary and inadequate adjuncts, leading inexorably to a theological 'crossing of the Rubicon' into the theologically more straightforward world of 'pluralism.' (9)

Barnes proposes that the space between self and other in faith dialogue is not the locus of adversarial debate resolved only when truth eventually emerges. It is a space where individuals face each other as they explore each other's beliefs with subtlety, challenge and respect. In this context dialogue is not necessarily seeking mutual acceptance or a common language. An encounter through dialogue will entail change if only a growth in an understanding of the other. Self and the other may not be seeking assimilation or domination but neither are they totally detached or unchanged by the encounter. As William Placher (1989) puts it: 'In a particular conversation, we learn from a particular conversation partner, in a way shaped by our own previous assumptions as well as by the insights of the person to whom we speak' (22). It is Barnes's identification of a 'relational space' in dialogue that has relevance for religious education. Dialogical education involves pupils and teachers in relationships where learning about self and learning about the other invites participation with the same attention to self and the other as needed for a successful jamming session and, like all good jamming sessions, results in the creation of something new.

It is self-evident that in a twenty-first century Western classroom some pupils will either come from homes that are secular, agnostic or atheistic, or have themselves chosen one of these positions. This is true of Faith Schools as of any secular state school (Ryan 2008). The engagement between religion and the secular, as well as across religions, is unavoidable in a contemporary religious education. It is the argument of this article that faith need not be exclusive to religious belief and as a consequence faith dialogue will draw in all pupils in the classroom. Fowler proposes that faith is a way 'of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives.' (1981, 5) He cites Tillich's (1952) *Dynamics of Faith* where Tillich himself challenges the simplistic identification of religion and faith. Tillich chooses instead to see faith as addressing those human areas of 'ultimate concern'. Later, in a similar vein, Niebhur (1957) describes faith as a 'centre of value and power sufficiently worthy to give lives unity and meaning' which is more subtle and complex than the identification of all faith as religious

faith. Others (Buber 1951) have made the distinction between 'belief in' and 'belief that' as a way of separating a *belief that* certain propositions (e.g. scientific evidence) help in meaning-making and in other circumstances a *belief in* an ultimate or a transcendent as a source of ultimate authority and power. Within a religious education context Stopes-Roe (1976) uses the term 'life stance' or 'stance for living' as a term that separates religion and faith.

> If the concept of a 'stance for living' is to do the work required of it, it is important that it shall preserve all the richness of the concept of 'religion,' apart from this one feature, belief in God. (25)

As a member of the British Humanist Association it is clear why Stopes-Roe would wish to ensure that 'life stances' as an area of study in religious education is taken seriously because it 'is operating with the notion of "ultimate," and with such criteria as "completeness" and "seriousness"…it has mythical, ritual, moral dimensions.' (27) It was some 28 years later that the English National Framework for Religious Education formally acceded to Stopes-Roe's argument and included secular 'world views' in addition to 'religions' as suitable areas of study. Grimmitt (1987) does not explicitly separate faith from religion, as this article proposes, but he is clear that being human entails 'the formulation of meaning about the human involves us entering what I will call the area of faith-responses.' (73) Others have chosen the term 'worldview' (Coles 1990; Erricker and Erricker 2000a, b; QCA 2004) to encompass those aspects of religious education which are not necessarily associated with religious faith. 'As the children narrate, they can be said to be constructing their worldviews.… The whole process…is dynamic, with no end point envisaged where the "worldview" is a finished product, and with no sense of "development" except change' (Erricker and Erricker 2000b, 199).

There are three main reasons for using the term faith dialogue to encompass religious and secular engagement in a post secular religious education classroom.

(1) As noted above, in a twentieth-first century English religious education classroom the range of pupil beliefs will encompass agnostic and atheistic positions and most religious education teachers would accept Stopes-Roe's argument that they deserve the same respect, and challenge, as faith of a religious nature. They are a reflection of the complexity of sameness and difference within contemporary society and teaching young people how to engage with subtle and complex difference has an impact outside the classroom in the larger local, national and global society. As Habermas (2008) argues: 'Both religious and secular mentalities must be open to a complementary learning process if we are to balance shared citizenship and cultural difference.' (1) Furthermore, this engagement through dialogue brings the secular and the religious face to face in a non-confrontational, non-antagonistic manner that encourages critical reflection, articulate communication and the development of personal identity.

(2) Faith as described throughout this paper is personal and faith dialogue is in the first person voice. While this may also be true for Stopes-Roe's 'life stances' the term 'worldview' is more often used in contemporary religious education discourse. It is, however, a problematic term for two reasons.

Firstly, faith as Fowler's 'life wager' or Tillich's areas of 'ultimate concern' is normative as it interrogates the relationship between faith and action in a more personal and accountable manner than is suggested in the term 'worldview'. Attending to life wagers or areas of ultimate concern has an impact on actions and living as self becomes agent in building a personal identity that is consistent with personal faith. Erricker and Erricker (2000b) also explain that from their experience with their 'Children and Worldviews Project' they found themselves 'moving towards the justification of a subject that cannot suitably describe itself as religious education' (31) but more a children's narrative of spiritual development. Finally, the absence of a central role for dialogue in this process of narrating a personal 'worldview' would preclude the term from dialogical religious education.

(3)   Faith dialogue is personal and is also communal. Each pupil belongs to a family and that family has relations beyond the family home. For some these relations extend into recognisable local, national and global faith communities. Faith dialogue is a two-way process; it brings a personal account of a faith tradition into the classroom and takes to the faith community a contemporary, outsider, perception of that community. The articulation and refinement of understanding, difference and challenge throughout the process is integral to the formation of identity for both the religious and secular pupil. What it means to be British and Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, agnostic, atheist etc. is of relevance within the religious education classroom as it is in the home or the synagogue, mosque or gurdwara and such relevance is personal and communal.

A pedagogy of faith dialogue needs clarity, patience and persistence. Clarity in skills and procedures that are necessary to facilitate dialogue in the classroom, patience when progress is slow and 'that's stupid' seems too easily to reveal the adversarial and confrontational habits acquired outside the classroom and persistence in Alexander's belief that dialogue in the classroom lays the foundation of social cohesion, active citizenship and good society even when evidence to the contrary seems to abound locally, nationally and globally. Following the language of the National Curriculum, English and Welsh religious education has, since 1994, adopted two attainment targets, learning about religion and learning from religion. This article proposes that it is now time to move on from these and a faith dialogue approach obviates their use. There is a general consensus that these two targets came from Grimmitt's (1987) work on religious education and human development but Grimmitt himself never intended that learning about and learning from religion would have such a normative influence on what he considers to be the English National Curriculum's rather a technicist approach to learning (Grimmitt 2000, 7). Rather than supporting progress in RE development, these two attainment targets have created a dualism in RE learning and teaching that Ofsted inspections have found problematic (Ofsted 2007, 7, 10.5; 2010, 12, 17). The greater problem lies with the second attainment target where both reports note the poor development of higher order thinking skills. Somehow the dualism between acquiring of facts, understanding the concepts and phenomena of religion and the transformative or meaning making task of education have been separated and the result has been an serious underdevelopment of what Tillich calls 'depth.' In his 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion, Grimmitt

rightly identifies two aspects that are central to religious education. Developing these into two attainment targets has de-coupled what should be inseparable. Dewey (1902) was clear that education was a dialectical process between child and curriculum and the task of the teacher was the bringing of the two together:

> Hence what concerns him as teacher, is the ways in which that subject may become a part of experience; what there is in the child's present that is usable with reference to it; how such elements are to be used; how his own knowledge of the subject-matter may assist in interpreting the child's needs and doings, and determine the medium in which the child should be placed in order that his growth may be properly directed. He is concerned, not with subject matter as such but with the subject matter as a related factor in a total and growing experience. (243)

It is the argument of this article that faith dialogue is a holistic process that side steps two attainment target and in doing so calls on the pupil to engage with, and articulate a response to concepts, beliefs and practices of faith. To do so demands the skills of higher order thinking that are reflected in Bloom's taxonomy of thinking skills and reflects Fisher's (2003) appreciation of the relationship between religion and education:

> Because religion incorporates basic and powerful beliefs about the human condition it is important that children have an opportunity to articulate, share and consider these beliefs. (240)

In his address to the Religious Education Council of England and Wales in May 2005, Archbishop Rowan Williams explored the notion of 'seriousness' as a key identifying element of RE and also referred to Simon Weil's identification of 'hesitation' as one of the gifts of the spirit. This article adopts these two elements and adds three others to create five elements of faith dialogue similar to Fisher's (2003, 263) 10 discourse features of language. Faith dialogue as a pedagogy of religious education entails seriousness, humility, hesitation, articulation and imagination.

(1) Seriousness: a faith dialogue pedagogy of religious education is serious because meaning-making is a serious business and as Stopes-Roe noted above, 'life stances' are dealing with notions of the 'ultimate' and 'completeness.' 'The point though is that to put somebody in touch with what is most serious in them and for them is a crucial educational aspiration and that is why Religious Education is not a marginal, Cinderella interest in education overall.' (Williams 2005). Dialogical religious education asks pupils to understand the faith and identity of others and their own and teaches the ability to articulate and refine a response to both.

(2) Humility: faith dialogue calls for humility because each participant comes to the others and her own beliefs recognising that the ownership of truth is contested and partial and that claiming a monopoly of truth makes dialogue redundant. This same sense of humility in dealing with claims of truth was reflected in the Catholic Church's teaching in the document Nostra Aetate of the Second Vatican Council:

> The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which reflect a ray of truth which enlightens all men. (Flannery 1997, 739)

(3) Hesitation is a learned skill of faith dialogue that reflects an appreciation that faith development and identity formation is a life-long process and therefore perceptions and expressions are always partial and frequently contingent. They need time and a rushed out-burst is often immature and frequently destructive.

> I think, it's about the habit of not rushing to judgement. I think that's a profoundly spiritual issue. What is it that educates in the habit of not rushing to judgement? Whether judgement of a person, or judgement about a situation, what is it that instils in us the necessary inner quiet, that means we act rather than we react? And somewhere in there is the very heart of the moral as well as the spiritual dimension. (Williams 2005)

(4) Articulation: religious education, faith education and identity education are all learning experiences. The ability to articulate what has been learned, and what questions arise from the learning, needs language and the skill to use this language with clarity and sensitivity. Understanding and using the language of faith has been long argued by Gates (2007).

> The 'inter-subjective checks on the internal coherence of a faith are as important to a religious tradition as to any group of natural scientists.… From an educational point of view, opportunity to check these credentials against personal experience is a very proper activity…to distinguish between encouraging children to become religious and enabling them to discover for themselves what it might mean to be a believer or an atheist – enabling them to become *religiate*, to coin a term.' (18)

When a pupil is learning to be numerate or literate they are expected to articulate the 'whys' and 'wherefores' of their reasoning and their actions, and there is a rightful expectation that pupils are equally articulate in faith dialogue.

(5) Imagination: when presenting the history of the development of Christian doctrine, John Henry Newman (1845), perhaps surprisingly for an apparently conventional Victorian English gentleman, found a key role for imagination. He believed that faith as an imaginative process is awakened and shaped by the images, symbols, rituals and conceptual representations of religion. To articulate faith the pupil needs to be conversant with image, symbol, ritual and representation and use sufficient imagination to recognise their meaning for another or their potential in the articulating their own faith. Similarly Ricoeur (1992) argues:

> Self-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self in turn finds in the narrative, among other subjects and symbols, a privileged form of mediation; the latter borrows from history as well as from fiction, making life story a fictional history or, if one prefers, a historical fiction, interweaving the historiographic style of biographies with the novelistic style of imaginary autobiographies. (114)

> This autobiographical building of identity, including faith identity, calls for the ability to imagine self reflected in a narrative, be that text or film, or as different from the narrative.

This positional article has proposed a dialogical pedagogy of religious education in which faith partners faith in the classroom. It has proposed the skills and attitudes necessary to learn how to dialogue and the corollary is to set these skills and attitudes within an education context that is relevant and useful. The proposal is to enact these elements in the classroom through narrative, place and person. What makes religious education relevant in the school curriculum is that it is personal, inter-personal and contemporary. Faith dialogue with faith narratives, religious and secular, aims to develop pupils' faith literacy and oracy. Engagement with places that express faith for self and/or the other extends a pupil's understanding of spaces that express or unveil faith for self and the other and extends each pupil's perceptions of her place and space in the world. Encountering the other in the first person reveals a relational space which offers the possibility of dialogue with its attendant challenges and opportunities. Thus, faith dialogue proposes a dynamic and dialectical religious education apposite for a twenty-first century, post-secular classroom.

Notes on contributor

Mike Castelli is a principal lecturer in the faculty of education at the University of Roehampton. His areas of research interest are the spiritual and moral development of children in Catholic schools.

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