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Championing the Underdog: a Positive Pluralist Approach to Religious Education for Equality and Diversity

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Championing the Underdog: a Positive Pluralist Approach to Religious Education for Equality and Diversity

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Declaration

I declare that the submitted material as a whole is not the same as any previously submitted or currently being submitted in published or unpublished form, for a degree, diploma or similar qualification at any university or similar institution.

Signed:

**List of Publications submitted in order of appearance in the
Covering Document**

(1994d) 'A Suggested Typology of Positions on Religious Diversity'. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 15(2), pp. 18-21.

(2001c) (with Francis, D.), 'Positive Pluralism to Awareness, Mystery and Value: a Case Study in RE Curriculum Development'. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 24(1), pp. 52-67.

(1999a) 'Models of Religious Education in a Plural Society: Looking to the Future'. In I. Borowik (ed.) *Church-State Relations in Eastern and Central Europe*. Krakow: Nomos, pp.377-387.

(1999c) 'Potential Pioneers of Pluralism: the Contribution of Religious Education to Intercultural Education in Multicultural Societies'. *Diskus*, 5(1).

(2007b) 'Should Religious Studies be part of the State School Curriculum?' *British Journal of Religious Education*, 29(3), pp. 217-227.

(2011a) 'Without Fear or Favour: Forty Years of Non-confessional and Multi-faith RE in Scandinavia and the UK'. In L. Franken & P. Loobuyck (eds.) *Religious Education in a Plural, Secularised Society: a Paradigm Shift*. (forthcoming, in press).

(2010c) (with Robinson, C.) "Do they really believe that?" Experiential Learning outside the Theology and Religious Studies Classroom'.

Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies, 10(1), pp. 55-72.

(2011e) (with Robinson, C.) 'Living Religion: Facilitating Fieldwork Placements in Theology and Religious Studies: Project Report'.

Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies. (forthcoming but available on website www.livingreligion.co.uk).

(2005b) 'Engaged Religious Studies'. *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies*, 4(2), pp. 83-103.

(1999d) 'Big Brother, Little Sister, and the Clerical Uncle: the relationship between Religious Studies, Religious Education and Theology?' *British Journal of Religious Education*, 21(3), pp. 137-146.

(2009) 'Religious Studies versus Theology: why I'm still glad that I converted from Theology to Religious Studies'. In D. Bird, and S. Smith (eds.) *Theology and Religious Studies in Higher Education: Global Perspectives*. London: Continuum, pp.15-30.

(1986b) 'Teaching Buddhism for A level and other public examinations'. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 9(1), pp.34-38.

- (1990) *Buddhists in Britain Today*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- (1993) 'Tiggy and the bodhisattva: creating empathy with the Buddhist perspective in the primary classroom'. In C. Erricker (ed.) *Teaching World Religions*. London: Heinemann, pp. 67-70.
- (1995a) 'The Buddha in a Bag - more ideas for Buddhism at KS1 and KS2'. *World Religions in Education 1995/96*, pp. 61-63.
- (1996a) 'British Buddhism and the New Age'. *Journal of Contemporary Religions*, 11(2), pp.195-208.
- (2008b) (with Backus, J.) 'Buddhism within the English State School System'. In M. Deegalle (ed.) *Dharma to the UK: A Centennial Celebration of Buddhist Legacy*. London: World Buddhist Foundation, pp.231-246.
- (1994c) (with Baumfield, V., Bowness, C. and Miller, J.) 'Model Syllabus Consultation Period: a Contribution'. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 15(1), pp.3-5.
- (1995b) (with Baumfield, V., Bowness, C. and Miller, J.) 'Model Syllabuses, the Debate Continues'. *Resource, the Journal of the Professional Council for Religious Education*, 18(1), pp.3-6.

(1997c) 'Paganism in the Classroom'. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 19(2), pp. 83-94.

(2007e) 'Wise Young Women: Beliefs, Values and Influences in the Adoption of Witchcraft by Teenage Girls in England'. In H. E. Johnston and P. Aloï (eds.) *The New Generation Witches: Teenage Witchcraft in Contemporary Culture*. London: Ashgate, pp. 139-160.

(2007a) 'Consumer Witchcraft: Are Teenage Witches a Creation of Commercial Interests?' *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 28(1), pp. 45-53.

(2010a) 'Teenage Witchcraft in Britain'. In S. Collins-Mayo, and P. Dandelion, (eds.) *Religion and Youth*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp.81-87.

(1999b) '“Learning from” the Concept and Concepts of a Religious Tradition: Jainism in the RE Curriculum'. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 20(1), pp. 60-74.

(1997b) (with Robinson, C.) 'The Sacred Cow: Hinduism and Ecology'. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 18(1), pp.25-37.

(2007c) (ed. with C. Robinson, M. York and L. Foulston) *The Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. London & York: Routledge, including entry 'Religious Education, Hinduism in' and entry (with Robinson, C.) 'Introduction', pp. x-xii and 675-677.

(2003) 'Should the State Fund "Schools with a Religious Character"? The Recent Debate about "Faith Schools" in England'. *Resource, the Journal of the Professional Council for Religious Education*, 25(2), pp.10-15.

(2005a) 'The Faith Schools Debate' Review Essay. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 26(3), pp. 435-442.

Introduction

It is 25 years since my first publications in professional and academic journals, *Resource* and the *British Journal of Religious Education* respectively, and thus a suitable point to reflect on my contribution to the discipline, or rather disciplines, of Religious Education and Religious Studies. Although the majority of my published work relates to religious education, my teaching and administrative career has included both religious studies and religious education, and I have also published materials relating to the religions themselves and the teaching of religious studies at university level.

Reviewing my publications, there is material on Buddhism, Hinduism, Paganism, faith based schools, teenage witches, religious education generally and internationally, the relationship between religious studies, theology and religious education, and experiential pedagogy in religious studies at university level. This may seem a rather random selection, but there are two threads that give coherence to my *oeuvre*. One is my personal and professional experience and the other a lifelong commitment to equality and diversity in the fields of religion and religious education, which I have labelled 'positive pluralism'.

First, I will give attention to personal and professional experience. My educational experience consists of a traditional theology degree, followed by a PGCE in secondary religious education and science, then an MA in

religious studies, focused on Phenomenology, Buddhism and Hinduism. My professional experience has been nine years teaching in a state-funded Roman Catholic sixth form college, followed by twenty-five years in a secular university, where I have been involved in primary and secondary teacher education and undergraduate and postgraduate teaching of religious studies. For the last twelve years I have had managerial responsibility for the subject areas of religion and philosophy.

One of the most empowering contributions of feminism in general and feminist theology/theology in particular is the recognition of experience, especially 'women's experience', as a valid source of authority (see for example, Isherwood and McEwan, 1993:79-80, Reid-Bowen, 2007:44-45). Thus, most of my publications have arisen from my reflections on what has been happening in my experience of interactions with people from religious communities, with students and schoolchildren, and with the political context within which religious education in schools and religious studies and teacher education at university has had to function. As Hitchcock and Hughes argue (1995:303) 'the teacher-researcher's own pool of personal knowledge and experience is a rich 'mine' which can be reflectively and critically worked to provide an important source of ideas for the generation of concepts and theories'.

The importance of personal biography in relation to teaching religious education and of 'RE teachers' experiences' has been examined in some depth by Judith Everington (from Sikes and Everington, 2001 to

Everington et al, 2011) who argues for the value of 'life history' as a research method. Thus one possible way of contextualising my publications would be to present them chronologically interwoven with my biography. However, I decided that more coherence would be given to reviewing them thematically, though within each theme, biographical material may be part of the context. One part of my professional biography which is relevant is that my professional life within teaching and a 'teaching-led' university has been mainly concerned with teaching and administration, which means that research has sometimes had to take a back seat and I have tended to work as an independent scholar, rather than as a member of a research team. As a result, my publications tend to be numerous but individual pieces rather than based on a few major research projects. Nevertheless, my publications have always been judged worthy of inclusion in the national Research Assessment Exercise, from 1992 onwards, and in the 2001 RAE, were especially mentioned as reaching international standards: 'the research outputs submitted demonstrated national excellence across the submission, with a small proportion at international level, particularly in the study of religious education' (Research Assessment Exercise Panel Feedback Report, 2001).

The second thread which provides coherence to my work is my commitment to equality and diversity, which manifests itself as 'championing the underdog', speaking out for whichever group or subject seems to be neglected, from Buddhism in the 1980s to Paganism in the

1990s/2000s. In fact, commitment to the subject of religious studies/religious education is itself an example of ‘championing the underdog’, which is the subject of section 2 below.

In the following text, dates in bold refer to publications submitted (e.g. **1994c**). Dates not in bold refer to further publications from the ‘full list of publications’ appended.

1. ‘Positive Pluralism’ as a theoretical framework for Religious Education

In several of the articles arguing for the importance of non-confessional, multi-faith religious education in the school curriculum (see section 2), I discuss my approach of ‘positive pluralism’, a term I first coined in 1991 when speaking to students and staff on a visit to universities in Vermont, USA, in contrast to what I experienced as ‘negative pluralism’ in the US education system, where religion was omitted from the state school curriculum. The concept was then further developed in (**1994d**) and through discussions with Dave Francis about models of religious education underpinning Agreed Syllabuses at the time of the SCAA Model Syllabuses (SCAA,1994), which culminated in our joint authorship of (**2001c**).

(1994d) ‘A Suggested Typology of Positions on Religious Diversity’.
Journal of Beliefs and Values, 15(2), pp. 18-21.

This article explains the origins of the concept of 'positive pluralism' in the context of different reactions to religious plurality (I am indebted to Geir Skeie [1995:84] for distinguishing between the descriptive 'plurality' and normative 'pluralism'). As well as coining the term 'positive pluralism', I coin a number of other terms, such as 'monoexclusivist', 'henoexclusivist', 'hierarchical', 'non-hierarchical' and 'segmentary inclusivist', adding new dimensions to the now traditional division into 'exclusivism', 'inclusivism' and 'pluralism' which seems to have originated with Alan Race (1983), as confirmed by a footnote in Hick (1995:18). An important point to note is that I use 'pluralism' in a different way from that employed by Christian theologians, summarised by Alister McGrath (2001:435) as holding 'that all the religious traditions of humanity are equally valid manifestations of, and paths to, the same core of religious reality' which is itself a faith position different from my own.

'Positive pluralism' is distinguished from other forms of pluralism by the following characteristics:

- the contention – or faith position, or value judgment – that plurality and diversity between and within traditions is a positive resource for the human race;
- the idea that even otherwise unpromising traditions might preserve some important insight that we could be in danger of overlooking. In the article I call this 'spiritual biodiversity', which is similar to the concept of the 'pneumatophore' which I later learned from Ursula King (see for example, 2009:194);

- having more room for exclusivists than most forms of theological pluralism which tend to favour more liberal versions of traditions;
- the attitude of ‘epistemological humility’, which definitely distinguishes it from the pluralism of the theologians, in that it does not claim to know that there is a ‘core of religious reality’;
- taking seriously non-religious viewpoints which deny any ‘religious reality’;
- it neither accepts nor denies the possibility of the existence of and/or the possibility of discovering ultimate reality/truth, but keeps both questions open;
- it accepts real diversity and disagreement between traditions and does not try to reconcile them prematurely;
- it does not claim that all paths are ‘equally valid’ as that suggests more knowledge of the truth than we have – and there are some irreconcilable claims. Thus it is not universalist or relativist in the negative sense, but relativist in the sense that there are no doubt relatively better and relatively worse worldviews and lifestyles, whether in the sense of corresponding to truth or in being helpful for human flourishing.

It is important to distinguish ‘positive pluralism’ from other forms of pluralism, because pluralist, non-confessional, multi-faith religious education has been accused (by, for example, Thompson [2004] or Barnes [2007]), possibly correctly in some classrooms, of indoctrinating children into the liberal theological view that all religions lead to the same

goal, or agnosticism, or to the postmodern secular attitude that any opinion is as good as any other (or in the words of one pupil, explaining why she liked RE, 'and no one can say you are wrong'). Positive pluralism hopes to avoid these traps. The notion of 'epistemological humility', which I first introduced in (1994d), and which distinguishes positive pluralism from theological pluralism and postmodern secular relativism, was apparently independently arrived at a similar time by David Chidester in South Africa (Jackson, 2004:181).

(2001c) (with Francis, D.), 'Positive Pluralism to Awareness, Mystery and Value: a Case Study in RE Curriculum Development'. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 24(1), pp.52-67.

In this article Dave Francis and myself demonstrated how the theoretical framework of positive pluralism became incarnate in a local Agreed Syllabus for RE. Having restated the approach to plurality, we applied it to religious education in an eleven point 'manifesto' for religious education which is reproduced in a note to chapter ten in Jackson (2004:187-8). The article goes on to explain how the 'six areas of enquiry' were developed as genuinely cross-religious categories (initially by Dave Francis but there was mutual influence with the discussions of the 'Third Perspective' group [see Section 7]), and how these areas of enquiry were employed to generate syllabus content and, crucially, tools for assessment. We also describe the involvement of stakeholders and the inevitable compromises that have to be made – for example, we were

unable in 1998 to include Paganism or Humanism explicitly, but made some implicit space for teachers who wanted to look at these, in the categories of 'human experience' and 'the natural world'.

In terms of the division of labour in this article, it was jointly authored, but the first (theoretical) half came more from my work and the details of working with the Agreed Syllabus came mainly from Dave Francis. This article has been cited by Teece (2005) in the *British Journal of Religious Education*, 27(1), Hayward (2006) in the *British Journal of Religious Education*, 28(2), Loobuyck and Franken (2011) and Byrne (2011) both in the *British Journal of Religious Education*, 33(1) and by Jackson (2004:187-8).

2. A rationale for religious education, pluralist, multi-faith and non-confessional as a subject in the school curriculum

Religious education itself can be seen as an 'underdog' in the English school curriculum and the curricula of the other United Kingdom nations. Often referred to since 1961 as a 'Cinderella' subject (Copley, 1997:69), reports over the years have provided hard evidence that it is least well served in terms of resources, time on the timetable, specialist teachers, initial teacher training and continuing professional development (for example Gates, [1993]; REC [2007]; and OFSTED reports from 1992/3). As well as being under-resourced, no other subject has had to spend so much of its time justifying its very existence in the curriculum. In the UK

context, scholars of education by no means agree that it merits a place (see, for example, the debate between White [2004] and Wright [2004]). Religious education in England has a strange position as a compulsory subject from which it is possible to withdraw, and which is locally organised when all other subjects are part of a National Curriculum. Several of my publications have been concerned with providing a rationale for religious education of a multi-faith and non-confessional kind. In these publications I have taken account of the fact that although there is a history of forty years of this type of religious education in the UK and Sweden, many other countries either do not have a place in the curriculum for religious education at all, for example the USA or France, or take a 'confessional' approach which nurtures pupils within the faith tradition that is deemed to be their heritage. The first example below is addressed to an international audience, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. Although I am a passionate advocate of the 'non-confessional, multi-faith' approach to religious education which is (in part) the approach taken in England and Wales and Scotland, I am also aware of Peter Schreiner's critique that 'every country likes its own system best' (Schreiner 2009), and that different contexts require different approaches.

(1999a) 'Models of Religious Education in a Plural Society: Looking to the Future'. In I. Borowik (ed.) *Church-State Relations in Eastern and Central Europe*. Krakow: Nomos, pp.377-387.

In the context of a publication, actually written in 1997, looking at relationships between religion and the state in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, I survey the diversity of religious education worldwide, suggest the main factors influencing approaches, and point out the commonalities, especially plurality, facing all countries East and West. The complex reality of religious education is simplified for convenience into three main models: negative pluralism, single or segmentary confessionalism, and non-confessional religious education. Expressing a preference for the last in the context of increasing plurality, I outline my own approach of 'positive pluralism', plural in content, recognising plurality within as well as between religions, and drawing upon a plurality of complementary pedagogies. This chapter is cited by Jackson (2004:166) and by Loobuyck and Franken (2011) in the *British Journal of Religious Education* 33(1).

One of the contrasts I draw attention to in this chapter is between the emphasis on religious education as a means to promote good relations between diverse religious groups and as an academic, intellectual study of worldviews. This is one of many tensions in the various goals of religious education, which, as has been pointed out by recent research (e.g. Conroy, 2011), are perhaps too many and too varied to really succeed at them all. As well as teaching about Christianity and at least five other religions and non-religious views, religious education is expected to cover a wide range of philosophical and ethical issues, address global problems, ensure cohesive communities, produce good

citizens and well-behaved children, contribute to sex and relationships education, drugs and alcohol education, multicultural education, and young people's personal, spiritual, and cultural education – all in one hour a week and often less. That being recognised, one of the most common arguments for the inclusion of religious education in the school curriculum is the 'multicultural' or 'intercultural' one, as is it increasingly recognised that in a globalised world, we need to understand the diverse worldviews and customs of our fellow human beings. This is the topic of the next article to be considered.

(1999c) 'Potential Pioneers of Pluralism: the Contribution of Religious Education to Intercultural Education in Multicultural Societies'.

***Diskus*, 5(1).**

This article was written for a religious studies audience and discusses the potential of religious education of the 'positive pluralist' sort to contribute to intercultural education. As the article explains, 'intercultural' is preferred to 'multicultural' by many scholars as it avoids the implication that 'cultures' are discrete and fixed and emphasises that they are interacting and changing (Kwami, 1996). The article also examines reasons why this potential has been neglected, and explores the complex relationship between 'religion' and 'culture', acknowledging the influence of Jackson (1997), although I had already problematised this relationship in (1994c). The article expands on the notion of 'positive pluralism', noting the relationship of Jain philosophy to this concept. This article was cited by Coulby (2008) in *Intercultural Education*, 19(4), although he considers

that my claim that religious education can contribute to intercultural education is 'most astonishingly' made.

(2007b) 'Should Religious Studies be part of the State School Curriculum?' *British Journal of Religious Education*, 29(3), pp. 217-227.

This article looks at one of the issues raised by countries where religious education is not a curriculum subject, such as France, the USA, Mexico or Canada. Does religious education need to be a separate subject or can religion be addressed just as successfully through other disciplines? It looks again at various responses to plurality, arguments for and against religious education being a separate subject in the curriculum and concludes that students are best served by a separate subject taught by specialist teachers.

This article was the most commonly downloaded article from the *British Journal of Religious Education* in 2008, and has been cited by the Canadian scholar John Valk (2009) in the *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 6(1).

(2011a) 'Without Fear or Favour: Forty Years of Non-confessional and Multi-faith RE in Scandinavia and the UK'. In L. Franken & P. Loobuyck (eds.) *Religious Education in a Plural, Secularised Society: a Paradigm Shift*. Münster: Waxmann Verlag (forthcoming, in press).

My most recent publication dealing with the general rationale for religious education was written in 2010 and is currently in press with Waxmann, as part of a publication stemming from a conference hosted by Antwerp University in November 2009. Looking at the contribution of British religious education in an international context, it reviews the history of forty years' experience of non-confessional religious education in the UK (England and Northern Ireland) and Scandinavia (Sweden, Denmark and Norway) for an audience of other countries, particularly Belgium, rethinking their approaches to the subject. The chapter examines reasons why non-confessional multi-faith religious education developed when it did, and argues that the importance of youth culture in the last 1960s/1970s has been neglected, then summarises the changes that have affected religious education in the last forty years, and analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches in each country. The title of the chapter incorporates my new motto for a positively pluralist approach to a religious education based on equality and diversity, religious education 'without fear or favour', a phrase dating back to the commentary on the Magna Carta (Guardian newspaper, 2009).

3. Pedagogy and Methodology in Religious Education and Religious Studies

I have chosen to link pedagogy and methodology together as questions about how students learn about religions and how scholars research religions overlap considerably, especially where students are involved in

first hand research. My own publications on pedagogy have focused on teaching and learning in religious studies at university level, but Julian Stern would argue that the two are also linked at school level, 'as it is difficult for pupils to learn without their being researchers' (2006:3). Two important influences on research and teaching in religious studies in Higher Education, as well as research and teaching in religious education in schools, are 'phenomenology' and 'ethnography' which have both been influential in my own research and teaching.

Phenomenology

As pointed out by Sutcliffe (2004:xxii), a 'broadly "phenomenological"' methodology characterised religious studies from the late 1960s to the late 1990s in the UK, and has also been very influential on religious education in the same period (see Jackson, 1997). The history of this approach to studying religions, and the influence and roles of philosophers and scholars such as Husserl, Kristensen, Eliade and van der Leeuw, is complex (see, for example, Sharpe, 1975 and Jackson, 1997). However, particularly influential on both university and school level studies in the UK was Ninian Smart (1927-2001) who pioneered the non-confessional, non-theological, 'religious studies' approach at Lancaster University from the opening of the new university department in 1967. The phenomenological approach popularised by Smart stressed the attempt to 'understand' religions rather than 'to argue for the truth of one or all religions or of none' (Smart, 1971:12), which was welcomed as an appropriate response for education in a plural society, for example by the

influential *Swann Report* (1985:495). Key terms in this approach included 'methodological agnosticism' (Smart, 1973:54; Cox, 2004:259), whereby, whatever the personal worldview of the scholar, for the purposes of study the truth claims of the religions in question are left open. From Husserl, the term 'epoche', or 'bracketing out' of preconceptions (Sharpe, 1975:224) is often used to characterise this approach. Particularly key to Smart's phenomenology is the notion of 'empathy', trying to understand the believer's perspective, which Smart describes as 'a kind of warm distance' (1979:8), but also as 'structured empathy' (1995:14-15) in that it involves knowledge, understanding and analysis. Central to the phenomenology of Husserl, less so for that of Smart, and hardly impacting upon phenomenology as influential on religious education, is the notion that through encountering sufficient manifestations of a phenomenon, one can grasp the 'essence' of the phenomenon in question through a kind of subjective intuition called 'eidetic vision' (Sharpe, 1975:224).

The phenomenological approach to studying religions has been much criticised in recent decades, from a number of directions. Among the more forceful arguments are that by reifying the concept of 'religion', it is a form of covert liberal theology (Fitzgerald, 2000) or that the separation of self and subject matter implied by the advice to bracket out presuppositions, and the grasping of essences are impossible (Flood, 1999). More generally, postmodern thinking has queried the possibility of objectivity, deconstructed the notion of 'essences' and emphasised the

subjectivity of the researcher (Erricker, 1999) and in a similar vein, feminist approaches have stressed 'reflexivity and relationality' (Sutcliffe, 2004:xxiii).

In my own work, 'phenomenology' has been influential, not so much as a philosophy or a method of study, but as a general attitude towards studying religions. Even if not completely possible, the attempt to acknowledge and put aside prejudices, and the effort to be sensitive to the believer's point of view, still seems the most appropriate attitude to take when respecting plurality and diversity. I would contend that phenomenology in religious education has functioned more as an attitude and approach in this way than as either a method of study or a 'how to' pedagogy. Marion Bowman has argued that a generally phenomenological approach can be used alongside ethnographic fieldwork in a mutually supportive way, especially when studying 'vernacular religion' (Bowman, 1992, reproduced in 2004).

Ethnography

Much of my own research has been qualitative and ethnographic, making use of participant observation and in particular semi-structured interviews. Qualitative research, 'a research strategy that usually emphasises words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data' (Bryman, 2008:366) is often favoured in both religious studies and educational research, in part because it is focused on the human scale. It 'places individual actors at its centre' and focuses 'upon context, meaning,

culture, history and biography' (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995:25). It is also, as the same authors point out, more appropriate and feasible for those whose main role is teaching, than 'large samples and statistical analysis'. Seale (2004) points out that qualitative research is by no means monolithic, and has 'a rich and varied history' (2004:113), being largely negatively defined as not being quantitative, and in part a 'romantic' reaction against 'science and rationality' (2004:106), part and parcel of the social change and youth culture of the late 1960s which, I have argued above, was also influential on the growth of multi-faith religious education. Qualitative research has been criticised for being too subjective, difficult to replicate, impossible to generalise and lacking in transparency (Bryman, 2008: 391-392), however these criticisms can be mitigated by not claiming too much in the way of generalisability and rather seeing a value in a rich account of an individual situation. My own preference for qualitative research is no doubt influenced by the reasons given above, particularly as the late 1960s championing of qualitative research was also associated with commitment to an 'egalitarian ethic', and 'feminist research' (Seale, 2004:106-107). I have also appreciated the 'creative and open ended' ((Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995: 303) nature of qualitative research where the outcome is uncertain and researcher and researched are partners in the creation of knowledge.

Ethnography, 'the study of people in naturally occurring settings' (Brewer, 2000:10), or 'empirical research on particular culture/peoples/regions conducted through fieldwork and participant observation' (Hackett,

2005:144), is a method which is frequently employed in both religious studies and educational research, and which also underpins the 'interpretive' approach to religious education pedagogy and research pioneered by the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (see Jackson, 1997 and 2004). I particularly endorse Nesbitt's definition of ethnography as 'an approach to understanding others which relies on a discipline of deep understanding and close, reflective observation' (2004:5). Ethnographic fieldwork ideally requires lengthy involvement with the communities being researched. My own ethnographic research therefore fits into the category of 'micro-ethnography' (Bryman, 2008:403) in that I have only had brief periods of time in which to conduct my research. Nevertheless, I contend that my research has been ethnographic in a wider sense than just conducting interviews, as I have stayed in religious communities, participated in rituals, helped with daily chores, scrutinised the contents of noticeboards and publicity materials and noted respondents' behaviour as well as their answers to questions (the 'variety of techniques' noted by Walsh, 2004:228). In common with other ethnographers, I have had to negotiate issues of access, and reflect on accuracy of interpretation and representativeness of findings.

Within the overarching qualitative and ethnographic approach, the technique that I have used most extensively is the semi-structured interview. Byrne defines 'qualitative interviews' as 'in-depth, loosely or *semi-structured* interviews' which 'have been referred to as "conversations with a purpose"' (2004:181). They are 'particularly useful

for accessing individuals' attitudes and values', allow 'interviewees to speak in their own voices' and thus are 'particularly attractive to researchers who want to explore voices and experiences, which they believe have been ignored, misrepresented or suppressed in the past', such as 'feminists' (Byrne, 2004:182). The main disadvantage of interviews is the reliability of the data thus obtained, whether the account from the respondent is accurate or because the method is 'prone to subjectivity and bias on behalf of the interviewer' (Cohen & Manion, 1994:272). Thus there is a particular need for the researcher to engage in reflexivity, acknowledging her own ontological and epistemological assumptions, including 'reflection on the impact of the researcher on the interaction with the interviewee' (Byrne, 2004:184). Feminist researchers stress the need for the relationship of interviewer and interviewee to be one of equals (Byrne, 2004:184, Bryman, 2008:463). As such, the interview may be seen as not so much a method of data collection, but one where data is generated by the partnership of interviewee and interviewer. This certainly took place during my research on 'Buddhism and the New Age' (see section 6 below). My own preference for the semi-structured interview over the questionnaire is because it is particularly suitable for my small scale projects which are however rich in detail from the interviewees' perspectives (c.f. Geertz' 'thick description' cited in Gellner, 1999:29), and from a practical perspective, if questions are ambiguous or leading this can be put right on the spot by further questions and explanations.

My first use of this qualitative, ethnographic method and the interview technique was for my MA dissertation in 1976-7. My research into Tibetan Buddhism in the West seemed to require that I actually went out to meet some of the people I was reading about, so I stayed in a Buddhist monastery and interviewed a lama and lay adherents. Later examples of such research (discussed further in following sections) are found in my work on Buddhists in Britain (**1990**), Christians in Britain (1991), Buddhists on the 'new age' (**1996a**), teachers and pupils in Mexico, the USA and Canada (2005), twenty religious groups in the Bath and North-East Somerset Local Authority (2010b) and teenage witches (**2007a, 2007e, 2010**) as well as the research behind the 'Living Religion' project (**2011e**). I have also attempted to approach fieldwork in a spirit of reflexivity, reflecting on my own assumptions, and sometimes learning as much about myself as the respondents, and to attend to the requirements of research ethics, especially when interviewing the under 18s, such as ensuring the safety of all concerned, and obtaining relevant permissions, including from parents. I have also made use of surveys and analysis of 'ephemera' such as magazines (for teenage witches and new age Buddhism) and letters to newspapers (for faith schools, **2003**) as well as the more conventional reviews of existing literature, and theoretical deliberations based on experience.

(2010c) (with Robinson, C.) "Do they really believe that?"

Experiential Learning outside the Theology and Religious Studies

Classroom'. *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies*, 10(1), pp. 55-72.

and

(2011e) (with Robinson, C.) 'Living Religion: Facilitating Fieldwork Placements in Theology and Religious Studies: Project Report'.

***Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies*. (forthcoming, but available on website**

www.livingreligion.co.uk)

Ethnography is also a major feature of my work on pedagogy at university level, particularly in the recent project with Catherine Robinson, funded by the Higher Education Academy Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject Centre, on students' use of fieldwork research: *Living Religion: Facilitating Fieldwork Placements in Theology and Religious Studies*, the main outcome of which is a website www.livingreligion.co.uk. Associated with the project are three articles, one published, one in press, and one forthcoming which focus on different aspects of the value of students acting as ethnographers in direct intensive encounters with religious and belief communities. **(2010c)** focuses on fieldwork placements as a form of experiential learning. **(2011d)** on the value of placements for enabling students to query accepted understandings of religions in diaspora and instead understanding religions of South Asian origin as British religions. **(2011f)** looks at the potential major contribution made by placement learning to the development of academic and 'employability' skills, whilst also noting the potential for placements with religious and belief communities for counter-cultural critique. The Project Report, **(2011e)**,

currently available on the Project website, but forthcoming in *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies*, chronicles the aims and activities, research methods, outcomes and plans for evaluation and continuity and a conclusion which re-emphasises the value of first hand encounter for both learning about religions, and personal development. Catherine Robinson and I worked together on the project as a whole and on the articles and project report.

(2005b) 'Engaged Religious Studies'. *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies*. 4(2), pp.83-103.

This article discusses pedagogy in religious studies at university level more generally, but both draws upon and is relevant to religious education in schools. Taking a cue from Michael Grimmitt (2000:8) that pedagogy is not just about method, but also aims and content, I examine all three. Within the content issue, I discuss the contested concept of 'religion', and the relationship between 'religion' and 'culture'. I reveal my concern about the continuing discontinuity between how and by whom Christianity is studied and how and by whom 'other' traditions are studied. I argue for a breadth of content on the grounds of the interests, experience and needs of students. On method, I discuss phenomenology and ethnography (as direct encounter with religious communities) as well as practical techniques offered by new technologies, and the crucial matter of the relationship between students and teacher. When it comes to aims, I argue for a threefold aim – not just understanding religious

people, but also the student's own intellectual and personal development, and the application of the insights from the subject to the major issues facing humanity, in other words making religious studies 'engaged' and more like religious education. This article has been cited by Thanissaro (2010) in *Contemporary Buddhism*, 11(1), by Sutcliffe (2006) in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 18(3), and by Plater (2007) in *British Journal of Religious Education*, 29:2.

4. The Relationship between Theology, Religious Studies and Religions Education

(2005b) touched upon the relationship between religious studies and theology, as well as both with religious education. This issue arose from my own biography and experience. My first degree was a very traditional Theology degree, largely Biblical, with the addition of systematic Theology both ancient and contemporary. It included learning Greek and Hebrew in order to read the Biblical texts in their original languages, and was wholly Christian in content. Influenced by the youth culture of the time, I was aware of the need to know about other traditions, and started reading what was then called 'comparative religion'. This interest was reinforced when I went on to a PGCE in Secondary Religious Education, as not only was I required to teach a variety of religious traditions on school experience, but discovered the work of Ninian Smart. The discovery of a non-confessional approach with the aim of 'understanding' religion rather than promoting it, a content which ranged across the whole world of religious traditions, and a method which included looking at

practical dimensions of religions such as ritual and experience as well as the narrative and doctrinal was exactly what I had been looking for, and I became an enthusiastic convert from 'theology' to 'religious studies'. Nine years experience teaching in secondary (mostly sixth form) education and my subsequent experience of teaching both religious studies and religious education in higher education, also led to reflection on the relationship between the two 'university' disciplines and religious education in schools.

(1999d) 'Big Brother, Little Sister, and the Clerical Uncle: the relationship between Religious Studies, Religious Education and Theology?' *British Journal of Religious Education*, 21(3), pp. 137-146.

This article represents my first attempt to discuss this issue in print. I characterise the relationship between the three disciplines as 'big brother' (religious studies), 'little sister' (religious education) and the 'clerical uncle' (theology), to reflect issues of power, status and gender. The majority of the article discusses the relationship between religious education and religious studies, and argues on grounds drawn from feminism, liberation theology, the nature of knowledge, and action research that religious education is a discipline in its own right, of equal value, not just the second-order practical application to the classroom of the findings of scholars. Theology is dealt with more briefly, distinguished from religious studies, rejected as a description of what we are trying to achieve in religious education, but welcomed as a critical partner. In the

conclusion to this article I suggest that ‘academic Religious Studies and academic Theology should stop squabbling’ and work in partnership.

When attending a conference organised by the Higher Education Academy Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject Centre some years later in 2006, on the topic of ‘Theology *and* Religious Studies or Theology *versus* Religious Studies?’, I expected that both disciplines would have indeed have matured enough to work as partners (as is suggested by Leirvik, 1999). However, I left the conference with the opposite view – that we still need to distinguish between the two, and that my sympathies were firmly with religious studies. The reasons for this are explored in the next publication to be considered.

(2009) ‘Religious Studies *versus* Theology: why I’m still glad that I converted from Theology to Religious Studies’. In D. Bird, and S. Smith, *Theology and Religious Studies in Higher Education: Global Perspectives*. London:Continuum, pp.15-30.

This chapter contains reflections on the nature of Theology and Religious Studies in the light of the conference, and concludes that the two still need to be clearly distinguished, do differ in approach, content and perspectives, and that there are still issues of equality between them. I also argue that both can learn from practice in religious education, where pupils can develop their own beliefs, values and spirituality (‘learn *from* religions’) without the subject being confessional or theological. My

chapter is summarised and discussed in the 'Introduction' to the book based on the conference proceedings, edited by Darlene Bird and Simon Smith, and contains the verdict 'Cush is perhaps right', in this instance, that 'the time is not yet right for scholars of theology and religious studies to develop a single approach' (Bird and Smith, 2009:12).

The 1999 article has been cited at least twice in the *British Journal of Religious Education* (Hayward, 2006, 28[2] and Carmody, 2008, 30[1]), and by Panjwani in the *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 2005, 53(3), as well as by Jackson (1999:88).

5. The equality and diversity agenda: championing the underdog.

Underlying much of my thinking about religious education is a commitment to pluralism, diversity and equality. Religious education, at least in state-funded community schools, should not leave any pupil feeling that their tradition or beliefs do not count as much as those of others. Even the discussion about the relationship between religious studies, religious education and theology, includes issues of unequal power between different religious traditions, genders and subject disciplines. The recent Equality Act 2010 requires public bodies to 'eliminate unlawful discrimination', 'advance equality of opportunity' and 'foster good relations between people from different groups' (Government Equalities Office 2011: 5). Nine 'protected characteristics' are listed, one of which is 'religion or belief – this includes lack of belief'. It is

encouraging that one of the examples listed of a recommended action is that '[a] school hosts a series of cultural events providing information to its pupils about different cultures and religions to remove barriers and so enable them to engage with each other, with the aim of *fostering good relations* between religious groups'. (Government Equalities Office, 2011: 6). This legislation replaces earlier acts including the *Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations* (2003) and the *Equality Act* (2006). It is important to realise that this legislation refers to 'religion' as a factor in a person's identity – thus it is illegal to discriminate against a person because they are a Muslim, but it is not illegal to dispute key tenets of Islamic *belief*.

The inclusion of 'religion and belief' as a characteristic of a person's identity alongside 'age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, sex, sexual orientation and marriage/civil partnership' reflects a growing recognition (perhaps since the Iranian revolution in 1979 and certainly since '9/11/2001') that secularisation in the sense of the decline in the importance of religion is neither an inevitable nor a monolithic process in Britain, let alone globally (see, for example, Davie, 2000:1), and although figures for attendance at traditional church services are declining, this is just part of a complex and changing situation with regard to religion and spirituality, one aspect of which, as Weller (2011:1) asserts, is that '[r]eligion or belief has become a much more visible marker of identity'.

Thus my approach to religious education, 'without fear or favour', neither neglecting religions nor giving a privileged place to one (or six) would appear to cohere with the current equality and diversity agenda. Although 'fear' might seem a strong word to use when discussing religion, it is reported that 'some [Higher Education] staff members are uncomfortable when confronted with decisions about the appropriate use of, or reference to, religion or belief materials' (Weller, 2011:7).

However, long before such legislation, a main concern of mine in religious education has been to ensure that notice is taken of traditions which have for whatever reason been relatively neglected. This 'championing the underdog' is seen in my published writing on Buddhism, Humanism and secular worldviews, Pagan and alternative worldviews, Jainism, and in a slightly different way, Hinduism. Each of these areas will now be considered in turn.

6. Buddhism as a Neglected Tradition in Religious Education

Although non-confessional, multi-faith religious education was pioneered in the UK at the end of the 1960s by the Shap Working Party on (World) Religions in Education (see Hayward, 2008), the introduction of particular religious traditions was very gradual over the following decades, and some traditions were less commonly found than others. In particular, during the 1970s and 1980s Buddhism was often neglected. It took some time for the 'big six' religious traditions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam,

Hinduism and Buddhism) to become traditional in religious education in the UK, and Buddhism was often the last to be considered, as is illustrated by the two editions of a widely used textbook, *Five Religions in the Twentieth Century* (Cole 1981), which was later reissued three years later as *Six Religions in the Twentieth Century* with the addition of material on Buddhism provided by Peggy Morgan. In the words of Wendy Dossett 'Buddhism is often the last religion any teacher may wish to tackle' (Dossett, 2000:320).

The neglect of Buddhism was usually explained in three main ways – the small number of Buddhists in the UK, the perceived difficulty or strangeness of the religious concepts, and the lack of resources for teachers. The numbers of Buddhists in Britain (the 2001 census figure is 149,157 or 0.3% of the population of the UK) is smaller than the other four of the main non-Christian traditions, and in addition, as many Buddhists (roughly 40%, again according to census data) are from the white European majority, there is a lack of a visibly different community when compared, for example, with Sikhs. The difficulty of understanding a tradition with such a different starting point from Christianity, and the initial lack of resources for teachers did tend to discourage teaching this tradition.

I was attracted to the study of Buddhism for some of the reasons cited (e.g. in Dossett, 2000) that dissuaded others. Following a traditional Theology degree based on Christianity, and largely on biblical texts and

systematic doctrine, and having read the work of Ninian Smart, I was curious to explore other traditions which contrasted with Christianity, so chose to focus in my MA study on Buddhism and Hinduism, rather than Islam and Judaism. Although I probably would not have admitted it at the time, I was perhaps also influenced by the status of these traditions in 'alternative' youth culture. As a newly qualified teacher in 1977 I was fired with enthusiasm to share with my students these new worlds which I had discovered, particularly the Buddhist world, judging correctly that like me, they would be fascinated by a religious tradition that was not centred on God, did not believe in a soul, and flourished in cultures very different from our own.

My very first venture into print, twenty-five years ago, while still teaching in secondary education, was a short article defending the teaching of Buddhism for A level examinations for pupils aged 16-18 (1986a). This was followed by an expanded version for the more academic *British Journal of Religious Education*.

(1986b) 'Teaching Buddhism for A level and other public examinations'. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 9(1), pp.34-38.

In this article I survey the examinations available, critique the rather pedestrian content of the syllabuses and their tendency to take Theravada Buddhism as normative, counter common objections to including Buddhism in religious education and put forward positive arguments for so doing. Re-reading this today, although students are probably slightly more familiar with Buddhism, most of the issues are still

current, although there is now a wealth of resources unavailable in the 1970s. I also note with surprise that there are no references, though there is an implicit one to Peggy Morgan. It is good to know however that this article is still being read, cited in Thanissaro (2010:73).

In teaching Buddhism for A level between 1977 and 1986, the lack of resources was a problem and I found very little that was suitable for my 16-18 year old students, and in the end resolved to write my own textbook, a project that I started preparing for in 1985 but which was not published until 1994. In the same year, 1985, I discovered the Shap Working Party conferences and the network of other practitioners that was crucial for moving forward. At the conference in Chichester *The Presence and Practice of Buddhism*, a group of teachers and lecturers who shared a similar concern for promoting and facilitating the teaching of Buddhism, formed the *Buddhism Resources Project* (Connolly, 1986:45, and see description in [2008b]). Among other objectives, the Project sought to support members in producing books and materials for schools. With this encouragement I was able to work on two books, *Buddhists in Britain Today* (1990) and make progress on my A level textbook *Buddhism* (1994a).

(1990) *Buddhists in Britain Today*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Although this is presented as a textbook for students aged 14-18, I am including this book because it is an example of primary research

undertaken between 1987 and 1989, employing qualitative, ethnographic methods such as participant observation and particularly the semi-structured interview. The data includes material not found elsewhere, not only minor details such as the Zen funeral for a cat or why candles and incense should not be blown out, but also important 'insider' perspectives on scepticism about relics or the multiplicity of images, and a chapter on the *Wa Shu* sect. As a textbook, the language is kept simple, there are questions to think about, suggestions for further activities and black and white illustrations. The sample of ten interviewees was chosen to represent the full diversity of Buddhism in Britain, including white and Asian Buddhists, men, women and children, lay and ordained, Zen, Theravada, Tibetan, Nichiren and other less known Buddhist schools. The decision was made to use the real names of respondents, partly because some would be easily identifiable from their position in the organisation (this applied even more to the companion volume on Christianity [1991] which included the then Bishop of Durham). In return, the respondents were given full veto over what was published (a technique known as 'member validation' [Walsh, 2004:236]). In retrospect, I think the more usual anonymity would have been preferable, both for ethical reasons and in return for more authorial control. Although the format is simple, there is some rich detail on British Buddhists not found in conventional textbooks on Buddhism, and the book provides authentic encounter with 'living religion' in its full diversity. It was well received at the time, for example W.Owen Cole, writing in *RE Today*, Spring 1992, said

Denise Cush has written the most enjoyable and immediately useful of the books in this survey...My own attempts to understand Buddhism have often been thwarted by [P]ali/[S]anskrit terminology and incomprehensible concepts which follow hard upon statements about the simplicity of the Buddha's analysis of the human condition and of the remedy he offered. Most of this book is about people who are Buddhist and the nature of their own beliefs and practices. The ideas are humanised and, consequently, made accessible and meaningful. Through interviews with ten Buddhists we are made aware of the unity and diversity of the tradition. The book is intended in part for the GCSE pupil and sixthformers. It is a guide which anyone understanding Buddhism should possess.

Although the book is now out of print, it is often photocopied, and cited by scholars of Buddhism in Britain (e.g. Bluck, 2006: 37), as well as those interested in Buddhists/Buddhism in education (e.g. Thanissaro, 2011:63). It was accepted as sufficiently scholarly to be suitable for submission to the university Research Assessment Exercise of 1992.

(1993) 'Tiggy and the bodhisattva: creating empathy with the Buddhist perspective in the primary classroom'. In C. Erricker (ed.) *Teaching World Religions*. London: Heinemann, pp. 67-70.

and

(1995a) 'The Buddha in a Bag - more ideas for Buddhism at KS1 and KS2'. *World Religions in Education 1995/96*, pp. 61-63.

In 1986, having moved from sixth form teaching into university teacher education for intending primary teachers, I turned my attention to the possibilities for teaching Buddhism at primary level (children aged 5-11), where it was even less likely to be found than in secondary schools, in spite of Peggy Morgan's pioneering reminder that 'Buddhists have children too' (Morgan, 1979). Working with both undergraduate students and teachers on in-service courses, ideas generated in the university were tried out in the classroom, and recorded in these two publications.

(1996a) 'British Buddhism and the New Age'. *Journal of Contemporary Religions*, 11(2), pp.195-208.

In the 1990s, having become increasingly interested in the neo-Pagan and 'new age' spiritualities originally experienced in the 'alternative' youth culture of the 1970s, I became aware of the close connections between the introduction of Buddhism to the West and the roots of 'new age' spirituality. In particular I became aware of the important role played by Theosophy at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century and the later similar cultural milieu which embedded both

Buddhism and 'new age' in the youth culture of the second half of the twentieth century. Using existing literature, magazines and other ephemera produced by Buddhist groups, personal correspondence and interviews, I explored the connection between British Buddhism and the so-called 'new age' during 1993-4, publishing the results in this 1996 article. Making this connection stirred up interest, and after delivering a conference paper in Leeds, I received invitations to give seminars to the Network of Buddhist Organisations and a colloquium at the University of Reading. An interesting reflection on this project was to notice that research can sometimes create data that did not exist before. Several of the people approached expressed the view that they had not really thought about their response to the 'new age' movement before, and then went away to generate a view. Most noticeable was the response of Vishvapani, who went away and wrote a complete article which then became part of the bibliography for my final piece, thus illustrating my contention in section 3 above that qualitative research may be a matter of mutual 'data generation' (Byrne, 2004:181) rather than mere data collection.

The article on 'British Buddhism and the New Age' was requested for inclusion in an encyclopaedic anthology of source materials on the 'new age' published in New York (2004a). To this day, I often get enquiries from international research students interested in this work (e.g. from universities in Paris and Amsterdam in 2010).

(2008b) (with Backus, J.) 'Buddhism within the English State School System'. In M. Deegalle (ed.) *Dharma to the UK: A Centennial Celebration of Buddhist Legacy*. London: World Buddhist Foundation, pp.231-246.

More recently, I was asked to contribute the chapter on Buddhism in education for a volume celebrating the centenary of the presence of Buddhism as a living religion in the UK, which served as an opportunity to reflect on three decades of experience of promoting the teaching of Buddhism at all levels of education, and to include the research and reflections of my colleague, Jo Backus. Although I wrote up the chapter as it stands, the material was generated from discussions between Jo Backus and myself, a Buddhist and a non-Buddhist. It provided an opportunity to review the forty year history of teaching 'world religions' in general and Buddhism in particular, more than three quarters of which we had participated in ourselves. We looked again at the reasons Buddhism had been relatively neglected and arguments for including Buddhism in religious education. We surveyed resources and typical content of syllabuses, and reported the results of Jo Backus' 1988 research contrasting the views of teachers and adherents on teaching Buddhism in schools, research that has not otherwise been published. Pages 236-237 represent my summary of Jo's more extensive research. The sections on controversies over the use of meditation and artefacts in the classroom summarises our dialogue about these. The critique of the 'instrumental' approach taken by teachers is notably Jo Backus', as is the critique of the aims of secular education and the possible tension with Buddhist

perspectives in the areas of autonomy and citizenship. It was encouraging to see that there is probably more teaching of Buddhism and there are certainly more useful resources than when we started, but depressing to see that some of the old issues of content and approach are still there.

This chapter has been cited by Thanissaro in two articles where he reports research illustrating the 'dissonance' between Buddhism as presented in school (if at all) and at home in Buddhist families with Asian origins, a new take on Jo Backus' earlier work on the contrasts between teacher and adherent perspectives (Thanissaro, 2010, 2011).

7. Humanist and Secular Worldviews as neglected in Religious Education

With the focus of the subject on 'religions', Humanist, atheist, secular and non-religious worldviews have tended to be neglected, with the results that children and young people without a 'religious' background tend not to think that religious education is for them, as their views tend not to be represented (as strongly argued in Rudge, 1998). This also supports the argument of certain educational philosophers that religious education should be the business of 'faith-based' schools only (e.g. White, 2004). Nevertheless, non-religious views have been present in the religious education classroom in two main ways. As Rudge points out, in the beliefs and values of many of the pupils present, but also more formally in

topics dealing with philosophy and ethics, such as the popular examination papers for A level (for pupils aged 16-18) where students might become familiar with a selection of thinkers such as Bertrand Russell, Richard Dawkins, Freud, A.J. Ayer or Nietzsche, but only in the context of debates in philosophy of religion, never as a complete worldview or system of values.

My first attempts to include Humanist beliefs, values and practices sprang from the recognition (common to many teachers) that the pupils in the class do not all have religious backgrounds, or may have rejected the beliefs of their parents. Moving from the faith-based sector into teacher education in 1986, I began to introduce Humanist perspectives into thematic topics in primary education, such as 'welcoming babies' or 'weddings' – what do families do if they do not belong to a religious tradition? This initiative was given a great impetus by the way Humanism and Humanists were treated in the consultation period leading up to the publication of the Model Syllabuses (1994). Having first been consulted, and asked to produce materials, the decision was made that Humanism (or 'ethical philosophies') did not count as a possible content area for religious education. John White, representing Humanists, felt so strongly about this that he wrote 'it seems that Orwell's 1984 is here and that a significant section of the population who lead humanistic lives have been declared unpersons and pushed down the memory hole' (White, 1995:32). This excision of Humanism from the content of religious education followed on the heels of the advice in the Circular 1/94

Religious Education and Collective Worship that, as Humanism is not a religion, Humanist representatives could not be accepted on group A (other religions and other denominations of Christianity) of the local SACREs (Standing Advisory Council on RE, the body that advises the Local Authority on religious education).

The inclusion of representatives of belief systems such as humanism, which do not amount to a religion or religious denomination, on committee A of an agreed syllabus conference of group A of a SACRE would be contrary to the legal provisions' (DfE, 1994:29)

Several SACREs managed to include to Humanists either because they happened to be teachers or councillors, or by co-option. My own reaction was from then on never to fail to include a session on Humanism in all my teacher education courses.

(1994c) (with Baumfield, V., Bowness, C. and Miller, J.) 'Model Syllabus Consultation Period: a Contribution'. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 15(1), pp.3-5.

and

(1995b) (with Baumfield, V., Bowness, C. and Miller, J.) 'Model Syllabuses, the Debate Continues'. *Resource, the Journal of the Professional Council for Religious Education*, 18(1), pp.3-6.

I have not written anything specifically on Humanism, but the inclusion of Humanism was one of the motivations behind the production of the *Third Perspective* (Baumfield, Bowness, Cush and Miller, 1994, described in **(1994c)** and **(1995b)**). The other motivations included the commitment to counting shared human experience as part of the content of religious education and not just the pedagogical context, and the desire to illustrate that both systematic (one religion studied at a time) and thematic (topics, either explicitly religious or implicitly so studied across more than one religion) approaches could be legitimate ways of looking at religious material with pupils. We also wanted to demonstrate that it is possible, without overburdening teachers, to ensure that pupils encounter all five of major non-Christian religions at least once in primary school and once in secondary school, and to leave space for additional traditions. The document itself was meant to be an illustration of an alternative way of producing a syllabus from the same materials, rather than a fully developed syllabus in itself. The related articles were written with equal input from each co-author.

The story of the *Third Perspective* is less than a page in the history of religious education in the UK (Copley, 1997:179), but the initiative did have some impact on the world of religious education at the time, and I would argue, continuing to this day. At the time, over 1000 copies were sold, both in the UK and abroad, and several Agreed Syllabuses used the *Third Perspective* alongside the Model Syllabuses. We were invited to address conferences, and the syllabus and related articles are often cited

in professional journals, for example in the *British Journal of Religious Education*, from Wright (1997) to Thanissaro (2011). Our 'seven areas of enquiry' had an indirect influence, via the Somerset Agreed Syllabus 1998, on the six strands in the Attainment Targets of the 'National Expectations in RE' in the QCA *Non-statutory Guidance on RE* (QCA, 2000: 4) and in the later version of the same in the QCA *Religious Education: the Non-Statutory Framework* (QCA, 2004:36). The debate about whether relating religious material to pupils' concerns and experiences is just part of the pedagogy or part of the essential content of religious education continues to this day (there is a current email discussion of Oates 2010 where he claims context and content have been confused).

However, the focus here is on our argument that in order to be inclusive of all children 'syllabuses should give some emphasis to non-religious belief systems' and 'avoid the notion that RE is only for religious people' (1994c: 3), and our inclusion of Humanism in the *Third Perspective* in every theme at every 'key stage' of education. Since 1994 there has been increasing support for our argument for the inclusion of Humanism and non-religious perspectives in religious education, most often on grounds of human rights theory and/or legislation. Nationally, the campaign to include Humanism finally received validation in the 2004 *Non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education* where the reason given is clear. 'It is essential that religious education enables pupils to share their own beliefs, viewpoints and ideas without ridicule. Many pupils come from

religious backgrounds but others have no attachment to religious beliefs and practices. To ensure that all pupils' voices are heard and the religious education curriculum is broad and balanced, it is recommended that there are opportunities for all pupils to study...secular philosophies such as Humanism' (QCA, 2004:12). Jacqueline Watson, in welcoming the Framework, argues that atheist beliefs and values should not only be included but should also be viewed positively as 'vital and valid sources of spirituality' (2008:56). She also points out that, as within religious traditions, there are diverse forms of atheism. In a later article, she reports on a survey of recent Agreed Syllabuses for religious education, which reveals that several Local Authorities are now including Humanism as a compulsory or recommended component of their syllabuses (Watson, 2010).

Internationally, the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public School* (2007) produced by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe on behalf of 56 participant states, makes it clear not only that education about religion and beliefs is important, but also that it should include 'religious and non-religious views in a way that is inclusive, fair and respectful' (2007:12). There have also been a number of cases where human rights legislation has been used to complain about religious education which is perceived as insufficiently 'objective, critical and pluralist' for example the cases taken to the European Court of Human Rights (2002) and the United Nations Human

Rights Committee (2004) by Norwegian Humanist parents (Hagesæther & Sandsmark, 2006, Relaño, 2010). The phrase 'religion(s) and/or belief(s)' appears to have become established nationally and internationally in the last decade as the easiest way to indicate that Humanist, atheist, secular and non-religious views are included, for example in the 2010 UK Equalities Act (see section 5 above) and the *QCA Religious Education: the Non-Statutory Framework* (2004).

8. Pagan and 'Alternative' Worldviews as Neglected in Religious Education

Pagan and other 'alternative' (in the sense of alternative to mainstream culture) religions, such as those labelled 'new age' or more vaguely 'contemporary spiritualities', were a component part of the 'underground' youth culture of the late 1960s/early 1970s which was also welcoming of 'Eastern' religions. Adding this layer to a childhood fascination with magic and myth meant that I have long had an interest in Pagan religions. My move into teacher education in the 1980s meant that I began to meet children and student teachers who self-identified as Pagan and I began to include Paganism in my teacher education courses and materials. Extra impetus was given to this concern by events happening locally and nationwide in the late 1980s. In one of my classes, a student teacher reported seeing a class teacher destroy a card made by a pupil for a Pagan festival – something unthinkable if applied to a Muslim or Christian festival. Nationally, there was a move against the celebration of

Halloween in schools initiated by certain Christian groups (see Homan, 1991), and accusations against Pagans of child abuse – known in Pagan circles as the Satanic Ritual Abuse Myth. Thus I found myself another ‘underdog’ to champion.

(1997c) ‘Paganism in the Classroom’. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 19(2), pp. 83-94.

This article was as far as I know the first to look at Paganism in the context of religious education. At the time it was described by the editors as ‘a quantum leap in educational thinking’ in arguing for the inclusion of aspects of Paganism as a living religion in the RE classroom, in addition to the stories, ancient Paganism and folk traditions already there. The article looks at the beliefs and practices of Pagans, the relationships between Pagans and Christians, and practical ideas for the classroom. The article has been cited by scholars such as Rudge (1998), and I received correspondence from teachers, one of whom claimed it was ‘the first non-soporific piece I have ever read in the BJRE’ and that it had ‘caused some considerable debate in the departments in which I work’. Interestingly, I did not receive any negative responses at all, which was surprising.

(2007e) ‘Wise Young Women: Beliefs, Values and Influences in the Adoption of Witchcraft by Teenage Girls in England’. In H. E. Johnston and P. Aloï (eds.) *The New Generation Witches: Teenage Witchcraft in Contemporary Culture*. London: Ashgate, pp. 139-160.

In 2003, having experience of increasing numbers of students who identified as witches, I decided to engage in more systematic research, initially on teenage witches, but soon broadening out more widely to young pagans. Between 2003 and 2008, I both surveyed materials aimed at or about teenage witches and engaged in qualitative research in the form of a series of semi-structured interviews with a total of fifteen young people, as well as a focus group discussion. In interviewing students, especially those under 18, I had to pay particular attention to research ethics, gaining permission from both parents and students themselves, and conducting the interviews in safe venues such as school premises or the students' own homes, with other adults (parents, teachers) within call.

I published two articles and a book chapter in 2007 (**2007a**, 2007d and **2007e**) on aspects of the 'teenage witches' research, followed by a further book chapter in 2010 (**2010a**). The most detailed treatment of the research to date, at least in its earlier stages, is to be found in (**2007e**). The chapter, written in 2005, documents the growth in interest in Witchcraft and Paganism, discusses the varied meaning and relationships between terms such as 'Wicca' and 'Pagan', and reports on findings from two main pieces of research: a survey of the materials available to young witches in the forms of books, magazines and on-line materials and six in-depth semi-structured interviews with young female 'witches'. The themes identified in the chapter include individualism, self as authority, identity, self-esteem, control over destiny, libertarian ethics, and empowering vocabulary. My

conclusion is that a study of teenage witches is useful not just in revealing something about the beliefs and values of a small number of young people, but is symptomatic of trends within youth spirituality more widely.

(2007a) 'Consumer Witchcraft: Are Teenage Witches a Creation of Commercial Interests?' *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 28(1), pp. 45-53.

This article employs the same research data to engage in debate with an Australian sociologist who is also studying the 'teen witch' phenomenon. I contest Ezzy's division between two types of witchcraft 'traditional witchcraft', which he sees as authentic and challenging, and 'white witchcraft', which he sees as a commercial creation offering no cultural critique (Ezzy, 2006). I argue that both analysis of some of the materials available and my interviews with teenage witches reveal that such a division is oversimplified, as, in common with other religious adherents, teenage witches find help with both ultimate concerns and with everyday problems in their religion. Ezzy and I continued our discussions over email.

(2010a) 'Teenage Witchcraft in Britain'. In S. Collins-Mayo, and P. Dandelion (eds.) *Religion and Youth*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp.81-87.

This chapter is a relatively concise summary of my work on 'teenage witchcraft' in Britain. However, when compared to the 2007 articles/chapters it is able to draw upon further interviews, notably with three

young male students, a further female student more involved in 'organised' Paganism, and two 'ex-witches', as well as upon other published research on 'teenage witches' and youth spirituality. I argue not only that the study of young witches and pagans offers 'an acute case of themes found in youth spirituality more generally' but also that Pagan theology and ritual practices provided the young Pagans with resources and resilience not available to all young people, most notably, a vocabulary with which to articulate their individual spirituality.

The 'teenage witches' theme attracted some media attention, with articles in local papers, and interviews on BBC Radio Four in 2003, and later following a number of conference papers and publications, Radio Cornwall and BBC Radio Bristol, and the height of my media career, a short film made in Glastonbury for the BBC television *Heaven and Earth Show* in 2007.

That the topic of Paganism in religious education is still controversial was illustrated by the recent debate over whether the Pagan Federation (an umbrella organisation for Pagan groups) could be admitted to membership of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales. I was pleased to find that they were finally accepted in May 2011, justifying my continued support for this cause. Further validation is provided by recent research from the University of Derby, which reveals that, at 2% of the survey sample (79/3935), more university students identified as Pagan than as Jewish or Sikh, and were the same percentage as Buddhist or Hindu students (79 c.f. 78 and 77). Of university staff, 1.4% identified as Pagan (44/3077) more

than Buddhist, Jewish or Sikh, and only just fewer than identifying as Hindu (Weller, Hooley and Moore, 2011).

In reviewing my published work on young Pagans, I realise that I have not yet written in detail about my research with young male Pagans, recent research on teenage witches or the relationship between teenage witches and the developing field of academic Pagan Theology, topics which I have touched upon in conference papers delivered in 2009 and 2010. This is a future project, along with further qualitative research, which will explore whether things have changed since 2003.

9. Jainism as a neglected tradition in Religious Education

My interest in Jainism was initiated by my concentration on religions of South Asian origin during my MA at Lancaster University (1976-7). It was further stimulated by a study tour in 1986 to India, mainly Rajasthan, organised by Ken Oldfield, then a lecturer at the West London Institute of Higher Education, where we visited Jain temples and met adherents.

The reification and limitation of the 'principal religions represented in Great Britain' (Education Reform Act, 1988, Clause 8/3) into the 'big six' of Christianity plus Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism, an artefact of British religious education between 1988 and 2004, made concrete by the Model Syllabuses in 1994 (SCAA 1994), had long frustrated me. So, when organising a conference in 1998 for the *National*

Association of Teachers in Higher and Further Education Religious Studies Sector, of which I was then Chair, we decided to branch out into new or neglected traditions, and I offered a paper called 'Jains for a Change'. In part the motivation for this work was indeed as simple as wanting a change after two decades of teaching the 'big six'. This motivation may also be shared by students – in conversations with year 12 students who attend our Sixth Form RE conference, and in planning the latest versions of our degree course with our undergraduate students, both 16/17 year olds and 18/19 year olds expressed a preference for looking at less known religions rather than the traditional 'big six' of their religious education to date.

(1999b) '“Learning from” the Concept and Concepts of a Religious Tradition: Jainism in the RE Curriculum'. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 20(1), pp. 60-74.

This article explores the value of studying Jainism and the experience of learning about an unfamiliar religion. The main point is to argue that even though Jains represent a small minority, and students may never knowingly meet a Jain, some of the ideas found in Jain teaching are extremely valuable for students' personal and philosophical development. Among the ideas I discuss are *anekantavada*, which cuts right through the polarity of absolute versus relative; *ahimsa*, highly influential on Gandhi, *anuvrat* or manageable targets, asceticism, interdependence and environmentalism, forgiveness, and religion without God or creation. In stressing the *ideas* of a

religious tradition, it may be thought that I am contradicting my usual support for an ethnographic approach and direct encounter with lived tradition. I would prefer to see it as complementary, as supported by the Jain concept of 'non-one-sidedness'. Having said that, a further incentive to branching out into Jainism was the presence of a Jain student in one of my classes, who was happy to be interviewed about her faith, and whose views enhanced my understanding.

The second purpose was to reflect upon the processes of learning an almost completely unfamiliar religious tradition with limited time, a salutary exercise for someone who has been teaching religions for decades. Robert Jackson described this as 'an exercise in creative pedagogy'. My main discoveries were that a multifaceted approach, using a variety of sources and methods worked best, and that the 'big ideas' of a tradition interested me more than detailed facts about practice, an interesting finding for a committed phenomenologist and ethnographer. The article also discusses Jainism in the context of wider questions about the aims, content and pedagogies of religious education, and the construction, reification and representation of religious traditions.

This excursion into the Jain tradition was to some extent validated by the explicit reference to Jainism in the 2004 *Non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education* 'it is recommended that there are opportunities for all pupils to study: other religions such as...Jainism' (QCA, 2004: 12). Since the *Framework* was published RE teachers have

felt more able to include a wider range of traditions, and I have always included Jainism when invited to talk to teachers' conferences on 'Beyond the Big Six' (Staffordshire, Lincolnshire, 2008). The article was cited by Damian Breen (2009:104).

10. Hinduism – not so much neglected as distorted

When compared to Buddhism in the 1970s and early 80s, or Paganism and Jainism in the present, it cannot be argued that Hinduism is neglected in religious education, as it features in the 'big six' normally found in Agreed Syllabuses, and even at primary level, for example in our local syllabus, Hinduism has been specified for Key Stage 2 (children aged 7-11) (Somerset County Council [1998] and 2004, 2011 updates). However, it can be argued that the version of 'Hinduism' found in religious education is at best a partial picture.

Many have written on the debate about whether even using the term 'Hinduism' is an orientalist distortion of a much more complex reality (for a summary of the work of scholars such as Frykenberg, Lorenzen, von Stietencron, B.K. Smith and W.C. Smith see the useful articles on 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' by Geoffrey Oddie, 2007 and 'Hinduism, History of Scholarship' by Will Sweetman, 2007). However, my concern is whether this history of scholarship, colonialism, outsider stereotyping or insider partiality and other factors have led to a distorted 'construct' of Hinduism

to be portrayed in British religious education. This has also been discussed by Robert Jackson in several articles, including (1996).

In (1994b), my colleague Catherine Robinson and I examined and contrasted two competing modern representations of Hinduism, 'Hindu universalism' as advanced in different ways by Vivekananda, Gandhi and Radhakrishnan and 'Hindu nationalism' as articulated by Tilak, Sarvakar and Hedgewar. We noted that religious education textbooks tended to emphasise the former as more attractive in a pluralist society. We concluded that both are 'contemporary constructions of Hindu identity' and urged the recognition that 'religious traditions are subject to growth and development as multi-faceted entities which do not permit of a simple single characterisation such as Hindu universalism entails'.

**(1997b) (with Robinson, C.) 'The Sacred Cow: Hinduism and Ecology'.
Journal of Beliefs and Values, 18 (1), pp.25-37.**

A similar concern for one-sided portrayals of Hinduism underpinned our second joint article on Hinduism and Ecology, where we looked at the presentation of Hinduism, by both outsiders and insiders as 'ecologically ideal'. While endorsing the depth of commitment to ecology shown by many Hindu activists and riches of the Hindu tradition that can be drawn upon to support these endeavours, we analysed many of the examples adduced from the tradition, and were forced to conclude that the application to the contemporary environmental crisis is an anachronistic

reinterpretation, in response to a recent agenda. In this Hindus are no different from other religious traditions, but it important to recognise the processes involved in reinterpreting traditions to meet new circumstances.

(2007c) (ed. with C. Robinson, M. York and L. Foulston) *The Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. London & York: Routledge, including entry 'Religious Education, Hinduism in' and entry (with Robinson, C.) 'Introduction', pp. x-xii and 675-677.

When asked to edit an 'Encyclopedia of Hinduism' for Routledge, we felt the necessity to start our 'Introduction' by querying 'whether such a thing as Hinduism really exists'. To balance other portrayals of the 'Hindu tradition' we wanted to capture diversity, and include popular and vernacular Hinduism, non-orthodox groups and new religious movements, the modern and contemporary, ethnographic as well as textual sources, ethical and political issues, and the significance of women as both religious agents and scholars and researchers. During this six year project, Catherine Robinson and myself worked literally at the same desk, approaching potential contributors, editing and reediting the majority of submissions together, with help in the final two years from Lynn Foulston. My role was partly to ensure that the language used communicated to the main intended audience, the undergraduate student. The Encyclopedia was a major undertaking, involving as it did the work of 114 international scholars, 900 entries and 1000+ pages. As

well as editing work, including cross-referencing, co-writing the 'Introduction' and some small entries, I was responsible for a short article on Hinduism within religious education, which reiterates the issue of the importance of diversity and a portrayal of the tradition(s) which is based on contemporary ethnographic research rather than reified constructs of 'Hindu-ism'. In this approach I am very much in sympathy with the 'interpretive' approach developed by the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit, with its base in first hand ethnographic data, producing materials such as Wayne and Everington (1996).

The Encyclopedia was very well received (see for example the reviews from *Booklist*, *Reference Reviews*, *American University* and *Theological Librarianship* recorded on the *Amazon* site), and went into paperback in 2010.

11. Positive Pluralism and other issues: the example of the 'faith schools' debate

A positive approach to pluralism and diversity in matters of religion and education is potentially applicable to a number of topical issues. One contemporary debate that I always enjoy engaging in with students is the debate about the existence of, and state funding for, 'schools with a religious character', usually referred to as 'faith schools'. Not only does this issue elicit strongly held opinions, but is one in which divergent and unpredictable views can be found, strange bedfellows find themselves

agreeing, and which reveals deeper issues about the relationship between 'church' and state, dominant constructions of national identity, the human rights of children and parents, and public funding versus private provision of services like schools. It even leads into discussion about the nature of religion, the meaning of secular(isation), the aims and purposes of education, and if pressed, of life itself. 'Positive pluralism' finds itself somewhat sitting on the fence in this debate: on the one hand a championing of diversity seems to suggest a welcoming of many different forms of provision, but on the other hand a concern for a society where plurality is welcomed would suggest an education system where children from different backgrounds learn together and enter into dialogue as part of everyday life in a common school.

(2003) 'Should the State Fund "Schools with a Religious Character"?' The Recent Debate about "Faith Schools" in England'. *Resource, the Journal of the Professional Council for Religious Education*, 25(2), pp.10-15.

I have not published a major piece of work on this issue, but have made a small contribution in **(2003)** and **(2005a)**. The *Resource* article in 2003 was mainly an observation and analysis of the debate taking place in 2001 and 2002, following the change in policy to support faith-based schools on the part of the Labour government, the publication of plans for expansion of school provision by the Church of England, and three years earlier, the first Muslim faith-based school to receive state funding. I

collected opinions from sources ranging from academic articles to letters to newspapers, particularly following the debate in the *Times Educational Supplement* and identified the most commonly cited arguments on both sides, and suggestions for ways forward. My own conclusion is that how an individual school deals with religious diversity and religious education, including links with other schools, is probably more important than the label.

(2005a) 'The Faith Schools Debate' Review Essay. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 26(3), pp. 435-442.

In 2005, an invitation to write a Review Essay for the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* based on Gardner, R. Cairns, J. and Lawton, D. (eds.) (2005) allowed me to revisit the topic. I was able to comment upon the importance of understanding the history behind the current situation and the complexities involved even in the differences between the four nations of the UK, as well as reviewing the contributions made by research in shedding light on an issue where, as the editors point out, debate is often 'mere exchange of opinion'.

These two pieces have had some impact. The 2003 article has been cited at least seven times, including by Breen (2009, *British Journal of Religious Education* 31[2]), Colson (2004, *British Journal of Religious Education* 26[1]), Ward (2008, *Intercultural Education* 19[4]), and **(2005a)** has been

cited by Baker (2009, *Research in Education* 81) and McCreery (2007, *Early Years: Journal of International Research and Development* 27[3]).

Conclusion and future directions

It has been an interesting exercise to review my publications over the last 25 years, observing my perennial advocacy of a pluralist religious education that is genuinely for all, applying the principle of equality to religious diversity, and the principle of 'epistemological humility' to questions of truth. It is also interesting to reflect upon the main intellectual influences and experiences that have led me to write about the particular themes that I have, influences and experiences which include Indian worldviews, the youth culture of the late 1960s/early 70s, Christian theologies, feminism, my experience of teaching at sixth form and university level, and within religious studies and religious education, the work of Ninian Smart and the department at Lancaster University and of Robert Jackson and the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit.

My main contributions to the development of religious education would seem to be as follows. I have developed the theoretical framework of 'positive pluralism' which is distinguished from both the pluralism of theologians and the cultural relativism of secularists by an 'epistemological humility' which treats 'religious' and 'non-religious' worldviews equally. I have contributed to the arguments for the importance of non-confessional and multi-faith/belief religious education as an essential part of the school

curriculum internationally. I have argued for the continuing necessity of distinguishing religious studies from theology and of defending the status and insights of religious education in relation to both. I have campaigned for the equal treatment of worldviews from Buddhism through Humanism to Paganism in the religious education curriculum. I have underlined the importance of taking note of youth culture in religious education, from the late 1960s interest in 'Eastern' religions to contemporary young pagans. I have explored the links between Western Buddhism and 'new age' thinking from nineteenth-century Theosophy to contemporary 'alternative spirituality'. Finally I have contributed original data and interpretations from fieldwork with Buddhists, Christians and teenage witches/young Pagans.

I intend to produce further work on young Pagans and perhaps to explore the impact of the faith backgrounds of intending teachers and Buddhist perspectives on education. There may of course be new developments to respond to. I write this at a time when religious education is yet again under threat from government education policy, an underdog still in need of much championing, something I intend to continue in future research and publications.

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