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The Interpretive Approach to Religious Education: Challenging Thompson's Interpretation

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**Robert Jackson**

Robert Jackson, Director, Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit, and Professor of Religions and Education, Institute of Education, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK.

E-mail: [r.jackson@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:r.jackson@warwick.ac.uk)

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## **The Interpretive Approach to Religious Education: Challenging Thompson's Interpretation**

### **Abstract**

In a recent book chapter, Matthew Thompson makes some criticisms of my work, including the interpretive approach to religious education and the research and activity of Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit. Against the background of a discussion of religious education in the public sphere, my response challenges Thompson's account by exposing his misinterpretations of my work, addressing his errors of fact, and commenting on his own position in relation to dialogical approaches to religious education. The article rehearses my long held view that the ideal form of religious education in fully state funded schools of a liberal democracy should be 'secular' but not 'secularist'; there should be no implication of an axiomatic secular humanist interpretation of religions.

**Keywords: interpretive approach, religious education, secularity, secularism, public sphere, dialogue**

## **The Interpretive Approach to Religious Education: Challenging Thompson's Interpretation**

### ***Introduction***

In a recent book chapter, Matthew Thompson (Thompson 2010) makes some criticisms of my work, including the interpretive approach to religious education and the research and activity of Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU), established in the early 1990s. I welcome academic debate, critical evaluation, and well-placed challenges to my position and to the work of WRERU. The problem is not that Thompson does not like what we do. I have no problem with that. The problem is that Thompson misrepresents what I and my colleagues do – and I cannot allow such misrepresentation to go unchallenged. In this response I propose to challenge Thompson's misrepresentations in three ways. First I will expose Thompson's misinterpretation of my work. Second, I will outline Thompson's errors of fact. Third, I will comment on Thompson's apparent position in relation to dialogical approaches to religious education. Before doing this, however, I need to set the scene by rehearsing the case for religion in the public sphere and public religious education.

### ***Religion in the public sphere and public religious education***

One shift in the ethos of religious education in publicly funded schools over the last decade or so is the increased acceptance of contributions to discussions about public education by a range of religious voices. This development is closely related to the debate about religion in the public sphere. Although the events of September 11, 2001 in the United States were a catalyst for bringing discussion of religion into public space (Jackson 2007), the trend was already developing in some European countries. For example, in England, the expansion of voluntary aided schools to include Muslim, Sikh and other schools resulted from policy developed by the 1997 Blair Government. This was a remarkable change, since earlier Labour Party policy had been opposed to any form of state funded faith based education (Jackson 2003). Even in France, where there has been a firm separation of religion and state, traditional understandings of *laïcité* are being challenged both by scholars and politicians on the one hand (Willaime 2007), and by young people in schools, on the other (Massignon 2011).

Bringing religious discourse into what Jürgen Habermas calls 'the informal public sphere' (Habermas 2006) should be seen as a positive development, not least to educational debate. Habermas does not write about public education specifically, as a subset of the informal public sphere, but envisages religious people explaining their language and experience to non-religious people, with non-religious people trying to understand the various dimensions – including the moral dimension – of what they articulate. In the field of education, the growth of literature on inter faith dialogue and education, and the emergence of initiatives facilitating dialogue and exchange between people of different religious and non-religious backgrounds,

are very much to be welcomed. These include work on inter faith dialogue involving pupils from primary schools (eg Ipgrave 2001, 2002, 2003; McKenna, Ipgrave & Jackson 2008), and work linking secondary students of different religious and non-religious backgrounds internationally, as in the Face-to-Faith project (<http://www.tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/pages/education/> accessed 22 August 2011).

### ***Thompson's Methodology***

Writing from a religious perspective, Matthew Thompson sets out to criticise what he sees as '...the secular humanist foundation on which the UK Government's social and educational strategy is constructed' (Thompson 2010, 145). Part of his case is to attack '...the same narrow, secular humanist world-view, with its distorting, reductionist approach to understanding religion...' in public religious education (Thompson 2010, 151). He detects this secularism in various policy documents, such as the Non Statutory National Framework for Religious Education (QCA 2004). However, he singles out my own work and that of Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit for particular attention: 'This secular worldview is prevalent in the work of Robert Jackson and the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU)' (Thompson 2010, 151).

As applied to my own work and to that of my colleagues in WRERU, Thompson's critical method is flawed in three ways. i) It is emotionally charged; ii) it fails to distinguish between what I utilise from various sources and what I do not; and iii) it fails to read and engage with the texts that represent my views (or indeed any writing by my colleagues in WRERU).

Thompson has produced an emotionally charged narrative declaring that 'the intellect plays a key yet necessarily secondary role to the heart in the quest for truth, goodness and righteousness' (Thompson 2010, 158). At one level I have some sympathy with this view. However, in terms of academic debate, Thompson's emotive account includes various unsubstantiated claims – for example, that the UK Government's social and educational strategies have a 'secular humanist foundation'. He also makes the assumption that the social sciences are inherently secularist. His chapter is studded with slogans – 'secular, social scientific categories', 'secular, social scientific framework', 'the Government's narrow secular framework', 'imposition of a narrow secular political framework', 'impose her own narrow, secular political framework', 'the Government's secular humanist framework' etc, etc. My own distinction between 'secularity' as a descriptive concept or social context and 'secularism' as a normative anti-religious position (Jackson 1997, 139) is not made by Thompson. The word 'secular' is used throughout his chapter emotively, normatively and pejoratively, and my work and that of my research unit is regarded as having a 'secular' (ie secularist) agenda.

In my book, *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach*, I wrote about the conditions under which religious education should take place in the publicly funded schools of a liberal democratic society. My position is very clear, but has passed Thompson by.

If justice and fairness (as values of a liberal, pluralistic democracy) are to be promoted through publicly-funded education, then the ideal form of religious

education in state funded schools should be ‘secular’ but not ‘secularist’. RE should be secular in the same way that India regards itself as a secular country, rather than a country promoting secularism; there should be no implication of an axiomatic secular humanist interpretation of religions. India’s secularity is intended as a guarantee of religious freedom and state impartiality towards religious and non-religious diversity. Taking this stance with regard to religious education is fundamentally a pragmatic rather than an ideological one. It is perhaps the only way that one can be confident that different religions and philosophies are dealt with fairly in schools. (Jackson 1997, 139)

I wrote further about this approach at some length in ‘Towards a pluralistic religious education’, Chapter 10 of *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality: Issues in Diversity and Pedagogy* (Jackson 2004). Thompson seems unaware of this text or that this is my position.

My view has much in common with that of Andrew Wright, who has argued recently that religious education in the publicly funded schools of secular democracies, which include a range of religious and non-religious faith communities, needs to embrace an agnostic stance (Wright 2010). Wright argues that this ‘agnosticism’, *which is procedural and practical rather than ideological*, and is equivalent to what I have called ‘epistemological openness’ (eg Jackson 1997, 126), needs to be grounded in Western political liberalism. This view is very close to Denise Cush’s idea of positive pluralism.

Positive pluralism actually welcomes plurality as an opportunity rather than a problem. Religions have never existed in hermetically sealed containers but have interacted throughout the centuries. Today, more than before, religions are in contact with and in dialogue with each other. Positive pluralism does not teach that all faiths are equally valid like the relativist, or all paths to the same goal like the universalist. It takes the differences and incommensurability of world views seriously, but approaches them from a viewpoint of ‘epistemological humility’ or ‘methodological agnosticism’. (Cush 1999, 384)

My view is also close to that of Trevor Cooling, writing as a Christian educator, who considers that religious education in the community school should ‘encourage debate between people of very different, and often fundamentally opposed views, and to assist in the development of strategies which enable people to work together for the common good despite their deeply held differences’ (Cooling 2002; see also Cooling 1990, 1994, 1997, 2010). Like mine (Jackson 1997, 139), Cooling’s rationale is expressed in terms of social pragmatism and civility within an open society (Cooling 2010, Chapter 4).

This general view has wide support both from religious education professionals and from faith communities. Recent work from the Muslim scholar Abdullah Sahin, for example, drawing on his own empirical research with young Muslims in Britain and on his studies of Islamic theology and education, shows how insights from Islam could enhance this form of religious education (Sahin 2010).

Thompson's method fails to distinguish between what I utilise from various sources and what I do not. In attacking my work, Thompson seems to take the view that, if a writer uses an idea from a particular source, then the writer should be identified with the whole philosophy of that source. In the case of my work, because I adopt an *idea* from the Canadian comparative religionist Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Thompson makes the assumption that I also adopt Smith's universalist theology. This is not the case. I presented my criticisms of Smith – including a critique of his theology – and explained my adaptation and development of his categories, in *Religious Education: an Interpretive Approach* (Jackson 1997, 62-69) and in *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality* (Jackson 2004), neither of which Thompson appears to have read. The latter source states:

What I do in my own work is to adapt Smith's *methodological* approach (which was of secondary interest to him) and to leave aside his theology. The methodological ideas are developed as an aid to understanding or interpreting religious material and are not used for theological purposes. It was Smith's introduction of the individual/tradition dynamic as an alternative way of representing religions reflecting individual personal views and avoiding stereotyping individuals as subscribers to monolithic belief systems that appealed to me. However, I do not adopt Smith's view of either faith or tradition. The way in which I use the term 'tradition' is different from Smith's and I deliberately do not use Smith's term 'faith' at all, explicitly setting it aside as a theologically loaded concept. Whereas Smith uses the idea of the interplay of individual faith and cumulative tradition as a hermeneutical tool to indicate the uniqueness of each person's theological position in relation to the total historical deposit of the tradition, I adopt a three level model (individual, group, tradition) as an interpretive device in which tradition is seen as a contested broad picture. (Jackson 2004, 69)

Similarly, I utilise some ideas from the work of the American ethnographer Clifford Geertz. Since Geertz is a social scientist, it is taken by Thompson that I am a secularist, for the social sciences, according to Thompson's assumption, are inherently secularist. I am not a secularist.

This does not mean to say that there is not a debate to be had concerning assumptions within the social sciences. There certainly have been anthropologists and other social scientists whose methodologies are narrowly positivistic. As I point out in *Religious Education: an Interpretive Approach*, I am concerned with the traditions of ethnography that criticise the positivistic tradition and that include artistic and humanistic elements, and especially those whose methodologies give voice to those whose life worlds are being studied (Jackson 1997, 32; 45-47). This tradition includes writers such as Edward Evans-Prichard (1950), Clifford Geertz (1983) and James Clifford (1988), although I should make it clear that their views differ from one another, and that my set of views is not identical with any of theirs.

I find it especially surprising that, in a critique of my work on the interpretive approach, neither the main book which develops its ideas (Jackson 1997), nor my next book which takes the ideas further (Jackson 2004) is mentioned or discussed in the text (the 1997 book

appears in Thompson's list of references, but is not mentioned in his text). None of my papers which clarify the interpretive approach further is referred to by Thompson (eg Jackson 2008).

There are more examples which show that Thompson fails to read and engage with the texts that represent my views. Thompson asserts:

There is an underlying assumption in this [*Jackson's interpretive*] approach (shared with secular humanism and gnostic universalist approaches to truth, religion and spirituality, including their Islamic manifestations) that faith and spirituality are universal human phenomena (as perceived by those thereby implicitly claiming an enlightened understanding that transcends the historically and culturally induced partiality of the masses) and of which religions are culturally varied, fluid and interchangeable manifestations. (Thompson 2010, 151-2)

Thompson continues:

Jackson's Warwick team's ethnographic approach to religion, do (*sic*) not present a neutral, objective perspective. They (*sic*) contain underlying assumptions that religions are just culturally variable and fluid expressions of universal spirituality which the enlightened elite perceive. Similar tendencies towards such universalism (and gnosticism), with its claim to provide an epistemologically neutral panacea for embracing diversity, is inherent in much Islamic thought. (Thompson 2010, 156)

Some of this is unclear, especially the two curious references to gnosticism. Once again, Thompson appears to be imposing a universalist theological position on my work. He also asserts that the Warwick approach exhibits 'presumptuousness' in 'claiming...epistemological objectivity and moral, religious and spiritual neutrality' (Thompson 2010, 156). Nowhere do we make such claims about 'neutrality' or 'epistemological objectivity'. The interpretive approach is reflexive, aiming to be impartial and epistemologically open – this does not imply 'neutrality' – while providing students with opportunities both to get close to material studied, thereby having the possibility to gain insight from it at a personal level (edification), and also to exercise *their own* critical judgement about what they have studied (Jackson 1997, 2000, 2004, 2011a). In short, Thompson's sentences do not represent my views, nor do they reflect the views of my colleagues in Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (who, incidentally, hold an interesting *variety* of views). There is no clear and specific reference by Thompson to any statements I have written in my books, or reference to what my colleagues have written. He refers to Michael Grimmitt's summary of some of my ideas (in Grimmitt 2000), rather than to my own publications. He cites (incorrectly) one chapter from an edited volume (Jackson 2000), quoting less than a sentence (Thompson 2010, 151).

### ***Thompson's Errors of Fact***

Some of Thompson's statements are untrue, for example about Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU). Thompson declares:

WRERU have been funded by the UN to help develop the Oslo Coalition Project and the promotion of teaching for tolerance, related to UNESCO's interreligious dialogue programme. (Thompson 2010, 151)

Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit has never received any funding from the United Nations for *any* project. Thompson cites a conference paper of mine published on the Internet (<http://folk.uio.no/leirvik/OsloCoalition/Jackson0904.htm> which he references as Jackson 2004) as the source for his information. He does not refer to its contents, but to the organisation (the Oslo Coalition) running the conference at which I presented the paper. My paper makes reference neither to the United Nations nor to UNESCO, and does not mention funding.

Thompson goes on to make the following accusation:

Jackson's approach receives disproportionately large establishment support and exercises disproportionately wide establishment influence partly because it is so compatible with and appealing to the establishment secularists who control education policy and funding. (Thompson 2010, 152)

This is a serious allegation. It is expressed imprecisely; there is no indication of what Thompson means by 'establishment support' and 'establishment influence'. Moreover, it is made without *any* supporting evidence. The allegation is especially serious since, in relation to my work, Thompson associates 'disproportionately large establishment support' with 'establishment secularists who control...funding'. There appears to be a suggestion that WRERU has received funds because the *views* of its staff match those of 'establishment' funding bodies, rather than through its track record of research or the quality of its research proposals. If 'establishment' means 'the UK Government', my research unit has conducted one research project that was funded by the previous Government (Thompson mentions it, citing the WRERU website as his source). The contract for this large-scale mixed methods project, involving 29 researchers (incidentally from a wide range of religious and non-religious backgrounds), was gained through open competitive tender, with decisions made by senior researchers (Jackson *et al.* 2010a, 2010b). Politicians were not involved at all in the decision making process. If 'establishment' means 'UK Government funded Research Councils' (or 'European Commission funded research'), then Thompson needs to educate himself about the strict processes through which these funds are allocated, which are independent of Government (or the European Commission) and are based entirely on academic peer review.

### ***Thompson's Position on Dialogue***

In criticising those he sees as 'secularists', Thompson does not state his own religious position, but the following remark seems to reveal his own personal stance:

An important perspective that traditional Christianity can bring to the table of inter-faith dialogue and RE is realism about human nature and society. This is a powerful

anti-dote (*sic*) to the proliferation of potentially destructive secular or Islamic utopianism. (Thompson 2010, 158)

With regard to religious education, Thompson's own tentative position is as follows:

Religious education would benefit from pedagogical strategies that enabled a faith once presented in its own terms (to be seen as mirrored in the experience of others of different faiths and none), who also have encountered the impact (not always positive) of its lived out reality. (Thompson 2010, 157)

I have some sympathy with this view. However, there remain serious questions about the representation of religions (the idea of understanding a religion 'in its own terms' is by no means straightforward), the understanding at depth of another's religious concepts and symbols, the awareness of one's own presuppositions and prejudices as a learner or teacher, and the capacity to live with and learn from difference. All of these are addressed seriously in my writing on the interpretive approach and related dialogical approaches, and in the work of those who have used and developed the interpretive approach. It is a pity that none of this has been captured in Thompson's chapter. It would be interesting to see the approach to pedagogy that Thompson himself develops for use in the classroom, including his views on the various roles to be taken by the teacher, his views on pupil voice, his views on the relationship between students' expressions of self identity in relation to the teacher's portrayal of a religion 'in its own terms', and his views on classroom procedures and power relations.

In relation to Thompson's written reactions to those with whom he disagrees, his stance, on the face of it, seems to be an unlikely basis for dialogue. Dialogue requires a genuine attempt to listen to and understand the views of other participants; it requires civility and engagement. It is interesting that adolescents from eight different European countries identify the importance of civility as a prerequisite for dialogue in relation to their own aspirations for the treatment of religious diversity in schools. The research of the European Commission funded REDCo project shows that many adolescents in various European states see the classroom as a *potentially* safe space for dialogue and exchange about religious and values issues, and for learning about religious and non-religious diversity in society (Jackson 2011b; Knauth *et al.* 2008; Valk *et al.* 2009). One of the challenges to educators is to create the conditions under which such exchange can take place in a civil way. These conditions should in no way reduce religious language to secular language, nor should they promote a form of relativism in which different positions are regarded as equally true. Of course, whether in the classroom or academic exchange, debate can be robust. There is nothing wrong with this so long as it is civil and high standards of scholarship are maintained.

### **Conclusion**

I totally support the view that religious voices, like Thompson's, should be heard within the 'informal public sphere'. Like Habermas, I think that such voices, whether traditional or progressive, potentially have something special and distinctive to offer to public understanding, and this includes contributions to discussion about religious education in publicly funded schools and dialogue within the classroom. I think that there are many

theoretical and practical issues to discuss in relation to forms of public religious education which are inclusive of, and give a voice to, those from different religious backgrounds and those who are not adherents to religious positions. As Michael Grimmitt has noted, the challenge is to produce pedagogies, which include the exploration of controversial issues in RE, while creating mutual respect and co-operation between people holding different views, whether religious or non-religious (Grimmitt 2010). All participants in such activity need to maintain the standards of civility that would be expected within classrooms, together with the academic standards of scholarship.

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