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## **Misrepresenting Religious Education's Past and Present in Looking Forward: Gearon Using Kuhn's Concepts of Paradigm, Paradigm Shift and Incommensurability**

**Robert Jackson**

### **Abstract**

In looking to the future, some writers on religious education have attempted to evaluate current approaches to the subject. Some have characterised any significant change in approach as a 'paradigm shift', a term derived from Thomas Kuhn's work in the philosophy of science. This article examines the uses of the terms 'paradigm', 'paradigm shift' and 'incommensurability' in Liam Gearon's book *MasterClass in Religious Education* (Gearon 2013). I argue that Gearon misapplies Kuhn's concepts, that his own account of paradigms of religious education is internally inconsistent, and that his discussion – partly through placing the views of others within a rigid framework of constructed paradigms – contains some misrepresentations of their work. The critique is pertinent to the debate about the nature and future of religious education for, if evaluations of present and past models of RE are defective, their use in re-thinking the shape and content of the subject is highly questionable.

**Key words:** paradigm, paradigm shift, incommensurability, religious education, paradigmatic disciplines, pedagogies

### **Introduction**

Liam Gearon makes significant use of the terms 'paradigm', 'paradigm shift' and 'incommensurability' in his book *MasterClass in Religious Education: Transforming Teaching and Learning* (Gearon 2013). In this article, I am concerned with the senses in which he uses Kuhn's terms, and with the appropriateness and function of that usage. In particular, I will argue that his account of paradigms of religious education is internally inconsistent, and challenge his use of Kuhn's categories in portraying and marginalising certain approaches to religious education.

### **Thomas Kuhn and Paradigms**

The idea of 'paradigm', as used by Gearon, is taken from Thomas Kuhn's book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn 1962, 1970, 1996). The term 'paradigm' refers to 'universally recognized scientific achievements that, for a time, provide model problems and solutions for a community of practitioners' (Kuhn 1996, 10). In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn saw the sciences as going through alternating periods of 'normal science', when an existing model of reality dominates for a substantial period, and 'revolution', when that

model undergoes sudden, drastic change – a ‘paradigm shift’. There is a *temporal* element here. Once a new paradigm is accepted (on the basis of theory and scientific research), the inadequacy of the earlier paradigm becomes evident. Scientific theories from different paradigms are ‘incommensurable’ since they are expressed within contrasting conceptual frameworks whose ‘languages’ lack sufficiently overlapping senses to permit any meaningful comparison of the theories, or to use empirical evidence to support one theory against the other. The transition in mechanics from Aristotelian mechanics to classical (Newtonian) mechanics is an example of a ‘paradigm shift’.

In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn writes, ‘the historian of science may be tempted to exclaim that when paradigms change, *the world itself changes with them*’ (1996 111). Thus, for Kuhn, a paradigm is not simply a theory, but implies the adoption of an entire conceptual scheme. When sufficient anomalies have occurred which question the current paradigm, the discipline concerned enters a state of crisis. New ideas are tried, and eventually a new paradigm emerges, gradually gaining acceptance. The change from one paradigm to another is a ‘paradigm shift’, a scientific revolution. The paradigms are not simply different; the new *supersedes* the old, and both cannot be held at the same time. In Kuhn’s view, the language and theories of different paradigms cannot be ‘translated’ into one another or evaluated rationally against one another – they are *incommensurable*. Some critics have questioned the coherence of incommensurability (Davidson 1974), and many writers have used the term ‘paradigm’ in a weaker sense which differs significantly from Kuhn’s original meaning within the scientific context. In effect, the terms ‘paradigm’ and ‘paradigm shift’ have entered some educational and other academic discourse in a looser way from that articulated originally by Kuhn (eg Franken & Loobuyck 2011). However, anyone persisting in using Kuhn’s idea of *incommensurability* (Barnes 2014; Gearon 2013), is advancing the view that a newly accepted paradigm supersedes and renders implausible earlier paradigms.

### **Gearon’s use of the term ‘paradigm’**

In *MasterClass in Religious Education*, Liam Gearon gives a brief historical sketch of the impact of the European Enlightenment on Western thought (Gearon 2013, 99-101). According to this, the liberation of political power from religious authority provided the environment for the shift from theological interpretations, raised confidence in human reason, precipitated the rapid development of the natural sciences and the emergence of the social sciences, as well as new approaches to philosophy. The new disciplines gave reductionist explanations of religion. An emergent study of religion, which developed into ‘religious studies’, became separated from ‘the religious life’. Religion as taught in schools within state education would also become separate from ‘the religious life’. Pedagogies would emerge that ‘sought to identify neither with the religious life nor theology, but with the very sciences which had critiqued religion’ (Gearon 2013, 101). It is these that Gearon seeks to criticise in his chapter entitled ‘Pedagogies of religious education’ (2013, 99-143), and he introduces Kuhn’s term ‘paradigm’.

In view of the association of these pedagogies with the new forms of enquiry, I use the term ‘paradigm’ to characterise specific and identifiable patterns from a broader

and arguably seismic shift in the nature of religious education itself... (Gearon 2013, 101).

Gearon admits 'We cannot say from the Enlightenment there was a *paradigm shift* from religious to secular understandings of the world... because both the religious and secular have persisted, with accommodations, tensions etc. Neither straightforward nor particularly modern, such tensions defined modernity but are not "paradigmatic"' (2013, 103).

However, Gearon persists in using both the terms 'paradigm' and 'incommensurability' in relation to his discussion of changes in religious education.

Here I think the notion of paradigms and incommensurability is one way to interpret significant changes in the nature and purposes of religious education. This is the case especially where research in the field draws from the social scientific and other disciplines which are in the history of science paradigmatic. Religious education researchers, for example, use (paradigmatic) social science frameworks in order to delineate both problems and frameworks as well as methods for resolving them... Evident 'incommensurability' emerged here. Changing the definition of the problem (the aims and purposes of religious education) changes *methods* (pedagogies, models of teaching, learning and assessment) for addressing these changes. Deep incompatibility between old and new or incommensurability becomes apparent... (2013, 104).

Thus, although Gearon acknowledges that his use of the term paradigm is different from that of Kuhn, he continues to use the term 'incommensurability', maintaining Kuhn's ideas of radical difference and incompatibility.

### **Two paradigms?**

Gearon's first distinction – between religious education as initiation into 'the religious life' and all subsequent approaches using social sciences, psychology and contemporary philosophy in their methodologies – does *not* represent a paradigm shift in the Kuhnian sense. The emergence of 'non-confessional' forms of religious education in England relates to a particular *context*, namely that of a public education in which children from different religious and non-religious backgrounds learn together in school. Inclusive, so-called 'non-confessional' approaches are not *in principle* incompatible with 'confessional' approaches and, historically, both have continued to exist and develop together; the adoption of the new 'paradigm' does not imply the inevitable demise of the old.<sup>1</sup> Thus, it is possible to support both an 'open', 'non-confessional' approach in publicly-funded inclusive schools, and particular forms of 'confessional' education in other contexts, such as supplementary education or faith-based schools. Moreover, many religious people would see certain forms of non-confessional religious education as potentially valuable for children from faith backgrounds. There is no incommensurability or *intrinsic* 'deep incompatibility' here, since communication between people supporting confessional and non-confessional religious education is, in principle, possible, and it is possible for individuals to value *both* forms in different contexts.

Of course, part of the problem is the use of the same term – ‘religious education’ – to denote *different* processes. Given the subject’s complex recent history in England and Wales, this terminological ambiguity has been inevitable (Gates & Jackson 2014). This is part of a wider issue concerning confusion related to the multiple meanings of technical terms in the field (Jackson 2014, 27-31). But terminological confusion does not imply incommensurability. What we might call ‘religious understanding’, developed through initiation into religious belief and practice, is logically distinct from ‘understanding religion(s)’ gained through the study of religions, although there is a relationship between the two processes (Jackson 2014, 22; Jackson 2015).

### **Six pedagogies equal six paradigms?**

Gearon not only insists that ‘non-confessional’ religious education is a new paradigm, but he goes on to subdivide it into *five separate* paradigms, each associated with a particular discipline which emerged from the European Enlightenment, and each opposed to the scriptural-theological paradigm:

I thus identify pedagogic developments in religious education as paradigmatic to the extent that each shifts from a distinct emphasis on (1) scripture and theology towards alternatives whose ideas and approaches are rooted in other disciplines or forms of knowledge: (2) phenomenological; (3) psychological; (4) philosophical; (5) sociological; and (6) political. (2013, 105)

Having now identified *disciplines* that are paradigmatic, Gearon proceeds to name six *pedagogies* each of which, he claims, is rooted in *one* particular discipline or ‘form of knowledge’: scriptural-theological (theology); phenomenological (phenomenology); psychological-experiential (psychology); philosophical-conceptual (philosophy); socio-cultural (sociology); historical-political (politics) (2013, 105). All others are distinguished from the scriptural-theological paradigm which, he says, the other paradigms claim to replace. Thus, Gearon has moved from claiming *two* paradigms, to *six paradigmatic disciplines* (theology, phenomenology, psychology, philosophy, sociology and politics), to *six pedagogies*, which he also claims to be paradigms, each based on a specific, single ‘paradigmatic discipline’.

Gearon adopts Michael Grimmitt’s view of a pedagogy as ‘a theory of teaching and learning encompassing aims, curriculum content and methodology’ (Grimmitt 2000, 8; Gearon 2013, 104). These ‘pedagogies’ (five of them claiming to supplant the scriptural-theological paradigm), says Gearon, represent ‘...a series of “paradigm shifts” in religious education’ (2013, 105). Indeed, ‘the word paradigm is used here, then, advisedly to demonstrate major *shifts* in religious education pedagogy’ (my italics) (2013, 104). If this is so, Gearon is presenting them as:

- exhibiting distinct theories of teaching and learning;
- being (in the case of all but the scriptural-theological paradigm) related to a *specific* ‘post-Enlightenment’ discipline (a social science or psychology or contemporary philosophy)

- being clearly distinct from one another;
- appearing in temporal sequence (with a new one replacing the previous one)
- having in common a rejection of the scriptural-theological paradigm.

Let us examine the nature of the individual paradigms, as outlined by Gearon, to judge how far he succeeds in establishing these claims.

### **The scriptural-theological paradigm (105-111)**

One might have expected to have read an account of the necessary and sufficient conditions for an approach to be considered as constitutive of the scriptural-theological paradigm, or at least a discussion of the relationship between studies of scripture and the practice of theology, and to have an articulated theory of teaching and learning related to these. Instead Gearon gives a sketch of the history of the ‘dual system’ of education in England and Wales, including brief comments on the 1870 Education Act, the Spens Report and the 1944 Education Act. There follows a brief overview of what Gearon sees as the negative and secularising effects of psychological and phenomenological research on religious education, presented as eroding the scriptural-theological paradigm. He does not specify what the scriptural-theological pedagogy/paradigm involves, nor discuss its appropriateness for the general school population; he does not outline particular theories of teaching and learning in relation to this ‘paradigm’, nor give a view on the role of the practice of religion in it. All that can be deduced is that the scriptural-theological paradigm, and his own view of the nature of religious education, involve initiation into what he calls ‘the religious life’.

### **The phenomenological paradigm (112-115)**

Rather than attempting to state necessary and sufficient conditions for the phenomenological paradigm, Gearon focuses specifically on the work of Ninian Smart. Gearon refers to writers such as Husserl and van der Leeuw as philosophical influences; ‘Smart took a complex discussion from philosophy, as it had filtered through phenomenology, and applied it very loosely to the understanding of religion as a phenomenon’ (Gearon 2013, 112). Gearon refers to Smart’s combination of *epoché* (suspension of belief) with empathy as the basis for understanding the religious experience of others. However, he focuses on Smart’s presentation of six (later seven) dimensions of religion, acknowledging the eclectic nature of Smart’s approach, drawing on the social sciences, philosophy and psychology which are judged by Gearon to be ‘reductive in approach’ (2013, 114).

We are given *some* idea of the range of skills and attitudes (of students and teachers) that would be necessary for this approach. For example, the capacity to suspend belief, and the ability to empathise, combine particular skills and attitudes, but no distinct theory of teaching and learning is articulated. Gearon identifies phenomenology as a particular discipline. Phenomenology is, however, a branch of recent European philosophy. Its extension as a method for the study of religions, was (as Gearon recognises), multidisciplinary, often combining elements of philosophical phenomenology with ideas from theological approaches to ‘comparative religion’ and other sources (Jackson 1997, 7-29). There is already a question mark then over whether phenomenology is a clear and distinct discipline in its own right (as

Gearon initially claimed), or whether it is a *methodology* drawing upon a number of disciplines (as Gearon appears to concede). Smart's approach represents a particular version of phenomenology of religion as an interdisciplinary field. Its rejection of 'confessional' forms of religious education is contextual; Smart was articulating an approach which he considered appropriate for inclusive schools; he was *not* rejecting confessional approaches to religious education *per se*.

### **The psychological-experiential paradigm (115-122)**

The looseness of Gearon's use of terminology is exemplified by his opening sentence: 'Psychology of religion was the dominant scientific paradigm to influence the modern field of education...' (2013, 115). Now a sub-discipline (psychology of religion), rather than the discipline itself (psychology) has become a paradigm. Instead of a tight definition of the psychological-experiential paradigm, Gearon gives a brief summary overview of the educational applications of psychology, noting that psychology as a discipline had an impact on religious education research through writers and researchers such as Colin Alves, Edwin Cox, Ronald Goldman, Kenneth Hyde and Harold Loukes. This was particularly so with regard to developmental psychology of a Piagetian type in the case of Ronald Goldman's research. Leslie Francis is credited with a continuing application of psychological theory and research to religious education, especially through attitudinal studies. Clive Erricker, Jane Erricker and Cathy Ota are mentioned in relation to educational work on children's spirituality, while John Hammond, David Hay and their collaborators appear as proponents of an experiential approach to RE. Gearon mentions the debate around their book, raising questions about the nature of spirituality, the relationship of spirituality to religion and the legitimacy of engaging in certain practices, such as stilling exercises, in inclusive classrooms. There follows a brief discussion of spirituality, mentioning its Judaeo-Christian pedigree, referring to philosophical discussions about the relationship between spirituality and particular religious traditions, and problems with the idea of non-religious spirituality (Gearon 2013, 120-122).

Thus, we are presented with a wide range of examples of researchers and curriculum developers who have used some or other aspects of psychology in their work. Gearon does not link any specific theory of teaching and learning to this so-called paradigm. Moreover, some of the examples given are strikingly different from one another and are associated with some very different epistemologies and teaching and learning theories. For example, the later work of Clive and Jane Erricker, is written within a normative post-modernist framework that rejects liberalism, adopts a pragmatic theory of truth, and is associated with a very specific approach to teaching and learning. This is strikingly different from the work of researchers such as Ronald Goldman (1964), writing with a modernist set of presuppositions, using Piaget's developmental psychology and dealing specifically with children's developing understanding of concepts. Leslie Francis continues to use social psychology, especially individual differences psychology, in his quantitative research on attitudes. His work bears scant relationship theoretically to some of the other work cited. The mix of different philosophies, theologies and epistemologies embedded in the examples show that *all* they

have in common is their relationship to the discipline of psychology. In no sense do they constitute a coherent ‘paradigm’.

### **The philosophical-conceptual paradigm (122-126)**

Although, initially, Gearon seemed to include any philosophically oriented pedagogy for religious education in the philosophical-conceptual paradigm, he focuses entirely on Andrew Wright’s approach which emphasises the pursuit of knowledge and truth in the context of a stated critical realist ontology and epistemology. Gearon quotes Wright:

Where confessionalism seeks to transmit one particular answer to the question of ultimate truth, the critical approach is concerned to equip pupils to engage intelligently in the quest for themselves... (Though) critical religious education is fundamentally concerned with questions of realistic truth it recognises the importance of a critical engagement with alternative understandings of ‘truth’ (Wright 2003, 286).

Critical religious education, summarises Gearon, does not claim that the issue of truth has been ignored, but that liberal religious education imposes neutrality in a ‘confessional’ manner (Wright 2003, 287). In Wright’s view, truth in liberal religious education operates on both immanent and transcendent levels. The immanent level involves a ‘pragmatic approach to truth, in which religion is taught not as an end in itself, but as a tool for encouraging tolerance and mutual understanding in a culturally divided society’. On the transcendent level, Wright says, ‘concerns for social cohesion have often led to the conclusion that, insofar as religion is viewed as a human response to transcendence, the only valid theological option is that of a universal theology in which all traditions are regarded as being equally true’ (Wright 2003, 287-8). Gearon is sympathetic to the criticism of instrumental justifications for religious education but, at least in this part of the book, he disagrees with Wright’s claim that a universalist theology is an *inevitable* concomitant of forms of religious education that include goals such as that of promoting social cohesion (Gearon 2013, 125). Gearon’s main criticisms of Wright’s approach are first that, while it criticises the separation of reason and experience in post-Enlightenment thinking, it actually supports this distinction, and, second, that philosophical-conceptual approaches neglect pre-Enlightenment emphases on experience in the religious life (such as prayer and mysticism) (2013, 126).

Given Gearon’s all-encompassing approach to the psychological-experiential paradigm, one wonders why he did not include other approaches to religious education using philosophy. For example, the philosophical approach found increasingly in English Advanced Level examination syllabuses in the philosophy of religion is not included, nor are various approaches utilizing existentialist or hermeneutical or post-modernist philosophy. Rather, Gearon selects a single, primarily philosophical approach, which takes a particular version of critical realist philosophy – as articulated by Roy Bhaskar (Wright 2013) – as axiomatic. Gearon does not identify any distinct theory of teaching and learning associated with Wright’s critical approach, other than emphasising the importance of the pursuit of truth, and there is no discussion of the suitability of the approach for different age groups. Moreover, Gearon assumes an antipathy between Wright’s critical approach and the scriptural-



theological paradigm. However, Wright respects the right of participants to maintain or adopt different religious and non-religious positions; his focus is on individuals deciding which claims they consider to be true or false.

### **The socio-cultural paradigm (126-131)**

Gearon describes socio-cultural approaches to religious education as ‘a sympathetic re-working of Smart’s phenomenology but placing more emphasis upon the socio--anthropological method’. However, the only example given is the present author’s interpretive approach. So, again, is Gearon thinking of generic paradigms associated with particular disciplines, from which he names or discusses examples (as in the case of the psychological-experiential paradigm based on the discipline of psychology) or is the specific example – in this case interpretive approach – the paradigm? The latter alternative seems to be the case since only the interpretive approach is mentioned and discussed. Gearon makes the following claims:

First, he relates the interpretive approach specifically to the discipline of *sociology* (105), and names Durkheim as a key influence:

The origins of this approach lie in the founding sociological work of Emile Durkheim and especially in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*... Durkheim at root saw religion as the highest form of society’s representation of itself. From Durkheim’s analysis of what were then regarded as religion’s ‘primitive’ origins, it was surmised that religion itself originated in society’s self-deification (2013, 127).

In order to fit his constructed set of ‘paradigms’, Gearon has placed the interpretive approach within a neat classification which requires a ‘socio-cultural’ example. Thus, Gearon reduces the interpretive approach’s frame of reference to society and culture, projecting upon it a theoretical underpinning from sociology, specifically from Durkheim. However, Durkheim’s work had *no* influence on the ideas or development of the interpretive approach. The single reference to Durkheim in *Religious Education: an Interpretive Approach* is critical (Jackson, 1997, 31). The interpretive approach aims first and foremost to foster *understanding of religion*, as it is lived and practised by persons (any instrumental concern is secondary), but such understanding requires a consideration of social and cultural context; concepts such as ethnicity, nationality, citizenship and culture are considered *in relation* to religious belief and practice. Fundamentally, the interpretive approach deals with *understanding another’s religious language and claims*, but is also concerned with the *personal* development of students, via the principle of reflexivity.

In brief, the interpretive approach uses three key concepts as general principles for dealing with the inclusive study of religions in schools. The concept of ‘representation’ deals with issues about how and in whose interests religions are portrayed in particular ways. The concept of ‘interpretation’ is concerned with understanding, as closely as possible, religious language, including the language and claims of people from particular religious backgrounds. This involves the use of imagination and, at the least, comparing and contrasting insiders’ ideas and experiences with the nearest equivalents from one’s own experience. The concept

of ‘reflexivity’ deals with personal responses to learning about others’ religious positions, ideas, claims etc. It includes getting as close to someone else’s religious position and experience as possible (through trying to grasp the meanings of their language, and then using empathy), and considering how one might change personally through encountering (not adopting) the beliefs and values of another – ‘edification’. Reflexivity also includes the process of criticism at a distance. This includes philosophical engagement with new learning about religion or a religious position at an appropriate level, which can include a consideration of truth claims (Jackson 1997; 2004; 2006; 2008a, b, c; 2009a, b; 2011b). In his description of the interpretive approach, Gearon mentions some critical points concerning representation, misconstrues the concept of edification, and does not discuss the central concept of interpretation at all.

Although influenced by the practice of ethnographic research, the interpretive approach draws on theory and method from an *eclectic* range of disciplines, including religious studies/theology, social and cultural anthropology, cultural studies, social psychology, and philosophy. Sometimes methods from a particular discipline are utilized without adopting their associated theory.

Gearon claims that the interpretive approach ‘removes boundaries which make the traditions identifiable as integral wholes’ (2013, 127) and is wary of the term ‘tradition’ (2013, 131). However, ‘tradition’ is a *central* concept in the interpretive approach. It is adapted from Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s idea of ‘cumulative tradition’ which, in effect, corresponds to the conventional idea of a religion. Smith saw tradition as ‘the entire mass of overt objective data that constitute the historical deposit...of the past religious life of the community in question’ (Smith 1978, 156). However, Smith’s definition avoids the issue of disagreement over the limits of any religion. In the interpretive approach, Smith’s idea is modified to take account of the fact that there might be scholarly disagreement over the boundaries of religions and that insiders from different parts of the tradition may not share the same ideas about its scope. Thus, in the interpretive approach, the term ‘religious tradition’ is often used as a synonym for ‘a religion’, but it is recognised that the precise representation of a religion is to some degree a matter of negotiation or even contest. As is made clear (eg Jackson 1997, 2008a), it does not follow from this that religions cannot be individuated.

Next, Gearon states that ‘...it is ethnographic insights *gleaned from children* which are the basis for the view that the religions are not the bounded traditions they are portrayed to be’ (my italics) (2013, 130). This is a misreading of what the interpretive approach has to say about representing religions (Jackson 1997, Chapter 3). This is essentially a discussion of the development of the modern concepts of religion and of religions in the West, especially the emergence of religions as schematic systems belief, the establishment of the names of religions, the development in the 19th century of ‘religion’ as a generic category, and the emergence in the 20th century of the term ‘world religions’. Issues of intercultural contact and of power in relation to the formation of Western assumptions about religions are considered, drawing on sources from the history of religions and cultural studies (Jackson 1997, 49-71). The question of boundaries comes up in relation to this discussion. In certain cases, disputed boundaries are experienced *by* children, as in the example of the boundaries

of Hinduism and Sikhism (Nesbitt 1991), and in the cases of children from minority traditions whose position within or outside a particular major religion is disputed by different ‘insiders’. The idea that ‘insights gleaned from children’ are the *source* for questioning the boundedness of religions misrepresents the interpretive approach.

Gearon repeats his assertion that the interpretive approach’s view of religions is based on ill-informed children’s testimony:

... It is ethnographic insights gleaned from children which are the basis for the view that religions are not bounded traditions. At a rather obvious level, if you are asking school children to define their traditions, it is hardly surprising that a portrayal of the tradition is not the best informed and is likely to be religion at its most ‘fuzzy’... If its rationale is based on a true representation of religions, then, this presents a rather insurmountable problem for its religious education pedagogy. In examining in minute detail the views of children with regard to the views of religion, this on its own is arguably an inevitably flawed source of (authoritative) representation (2013, 131).

These comments show a fundamental misunderstanding of the interpretive approach. Some of the initial ideas incorporated into the interpretive approach came out of the development of a methodology for *studying* children from religious backgrounds in the context of their families, communities and wider traditions. Anyone reading the key texts would surely realise that the methodology did not come out of the *testimony* or *views* of children, but incorporates a variety of methods from a range of academic disciplines discussed in *Religious Education: an Interpretive Approach* and elsewhere.

Gearon also claims that the idea of ‘edification’ shows how the interpretive approach’s ‘socio-cultural methods reflect socio-cultural intentions’ (2013, 131). He presumably is suggesting that the interpretive approach reduces religion to culture. This claim is based on a quotation (from Jackson 2011a) which discusses briefly the concept of edification in relation to young people’s studies of their own ‘ancestral traditions’, as well as studies of others’ religious traditions. The point being made in the quotation is a hermeneutical one. A student who now may be detached from a particular religious tradition can potentially learn about self and other by encountering that tradition anew and from a distance. There is no reduction of religion to culture here. ‘Edification’ is an aspect of *reflexivity*, a principle requiring both an ability to see the religion as far as possible from the insider’s perspective, and to use skills of critical evaluation at a distance, including examining the moral dimension of the religion (Jackson 2009a), and discussing truth claims (Jackson 2009b).

Gearon’s only quoted sources concerning the interpretive approach are articles relating to the European Commission REDCo project, in which the key concepts of the interpretive approach were used as a reference point for *researchers* using qualitative and quantitative methods in collecting data from or about 14 to 16-year-olds in schools in different European countries. They were *not*, as Gearon claims, used ‘as both research method and pedagogical approach’ (2013, 128). Rather, ‘it was considered appropriate to use the interpretive approach not to impose any uniformity in theory, epistemology or method, but as a *stimulus* to

theoretical thinking in relation to field research methods and to pedagogy' (Jackson 2011a, 194).

### **The historical-political paradigm (132-134)**

According to Gearon, 'the historical-political paradigm emphasises understanding present-day uses of religion in education as a means of achieving broad political goals' (2013, 132). (This and related themes are also discussed in Gearon 2014, reviewed by Rob Freathy in the present issue of the *Journal of Beliefs and Values* [Freathy 2015]). These are presented as instrumental forms of religious education intended to promote social harmony or reduce conflict. The paradigm is 'historical' since it seeks legitimacy by looking back, notably to the European Enlightenment. However, although related to political and social issues, the historical-political paradigm has no distinct theory of teaching and learning. Nor does it claim to replace other paradigms. Moreover, unlike paradigms 1-4, which are seen as clearly distinguishable from one another (in Kuhn's terms, that is the *point* of paradigms), the historical-political paradigm is linked closely by Gearon with the socio-cultural paradigm: 'the close association of the historical-political with the socio-cultural paradigm is evident in those models in their theoretical modelling of religion as a source of social bonding and identity...' (2013, 132). Thus, Gearon's own account of this paradigm fails to meet his own specified necessary conditions for a pedagogy to *be* a paradigm.

Gearon especially targets REDCo, a European project which included empirical research on the views of 14 to 16-year-olds on the place of religion in their lives, schools and societies together with studies of classroom interaction and other associated studies. The research was conducted collaboratively in eight nations by empirical researchers from those countries, with academic backgrounds in the social sciences, psychology, philosophy, theology, religious studies and education (ter Avest et al. 2009; Knauth et al. 2008; Valk et al. 2009).

Gearon claims that participation in any such *research* has an instrumental social or political goal (for example, promoting social cohesion), and implies that the researchers, and the users of their research, also regard the process of *religious education* as having a *single* 'political' aim (eg 2013, 132-134). Gearon's view can be summarised as follows: democratic states, responding to increased religious and cultural diversity, have an interest in promoting tolerance (eg through promoting human rights), and therefore develop policies to support it. Researchers collude with governments or their agencies through accepting funding to conduct research that supports this (2013, 36). REDCo researchers focus entirely on issues raised by the young, which determine a religious education pedagogy aiming to increase tolerance through classroom 'dialogue' (2013, 133). In the research itself, and in pedagogy that relates to it, conflict is filtered out; profound differences are not taken seriously; and truth claims are not considered. Moreover, there is 'a theological notion of religious pluralism in which all religions represent cultural variations of one ultimate reality' (2013, 134).

Gearon's claims are highly questionable. First, it does not follow from the fact that a piece of research focuses on a 'social' issue, such as handling religious diversity in classroom contexts, that the researchers involved subscribe to a *single* 'historical-political' aim for

religious education. For example, social aims (such as increasing tolerance) are closely inter-related with personal views and commitments, which – in the case of students from religious backgrounds – also connect with the wider teachings of religious groups and traditions. Moreover, participants in research may also support other aims, such as regarding the study of religion and values as intrinsically worthwhile (Jackson 2015).

Second, Gearon asserts a dubious relationship between the controlling agendas of political bodies (eg the European Commission) and funding for particular research projects, such as REDCo (2013, 36). But why should not the priorities of a political body accurately reflect actual social need? Researchers (like other citizens) might share some current governmental concerns, such as social cohesion in complex democratic societies, in which local and global issues may be inextricably linked. Moreover, shifts in policy with regard to religion in schools may be in response to lobbying from citizens, including educators or researchers.

Third, it does not follow that research findings *concerned with* young people's views and experience engender a form of religious education that is entirely *based upon* their views and experience. REDCo researchers were interested in issues surrounding student-to-student dialogue, but there was no assumption that dialogue should *constitute* religious education. The goal of having well informed teachers, able to provide authoritative information about religions and beliefs, was regarded as essential (von der Lippe 2010). Teacher competence in this field requires *both* subject knowledge and skills enabling civil student-to-student interaction (Jackson 2014, 33-46).

Fourth, there was no agenda to play down or to filter out conflict in student exchanges in the REDCo Project; quite the reverse. Despite some students' stated wish to avoid conflict, REDCo researchers argue in some detail for the constructive *use* of 'conflict' in teaching and learning (Knauth 2009; von der Lippe 2011; Skeie 2008), while accounts of classroom interaction give concrete examples of such use (Kozyrev 2009; O'Grady 2009, 2013).

Fifth, there was no universalist or pluralistic theology underpinning the REDCo Project and no expectation that students should be encouraged to adopt such a theology. Many students with conservative religious theologies participated in REDCo research, and showed no signs of changing their views. REDCo researchers, with expertise in a range of relevant academic disciplines, came from a variety of religious and non-religious backgrounds and did not share a common theological viewpoint or set of assumptions.

## **Conclusion**

Gearon's attempt to portray a series of pedagogies of religious education as incommensurable paradigms fails decisively. According to Gearon, changing the definition of the problem (the aims of religious education) precipitates a change of paradigm, leading to 'deep incompatibility between old and new or incommensurability'. However, his distinction between religious education as initiation into 'the religious life' and all subsequent approaches using social sciences, psychology and contemporary philosophy in their methodologies does *not* represent a paradigm shift since 'non-confessional' approaches are not incompatible *in principle* with 'confessional' approaches, and do not necessarily exhibit

or *only* pursue instrumental aims, and examples of both have continued to exist at the same time, sometimes with individuals supporting versions of *both* forms in different contexts.

Gearon's account is internally inconsistent since he both persists in regarding 'non-confessional' religious education as a new paradigm, and then identifies a *series* of 'post-Enlightenment' disciplines which he regards as paradigmatic (phenomenology, psychology, philosophy, sociology and politics). All of these, he claims, are inherently secularist and incompatible with theology. Gearon then changes course and identifies five *pedagogies* of religious education as paradigms. Each of these pedagogies/paradigms, claims Gearon, is based on a specific paradigmatic discipline and each is inconsistent with the biblical-theological paradigm. He then proceeds to attack each one, concentrating on ways in which he considers they undermine religious education as initiation into the religious life. Thus, at various points, Gearon presents two paradigms, six disciplines that are 'paradigmatic' and six so-called 'pedagogies' which are *also* paradigms.

Other criticisms further undermine Gearon's paradigm schema. First, at least three of the putative pedagogies/paradigms are *not* pedagogies, and do not have distinct theories of teaching and learning. With regard to the scriptural-theological paradigm, instead of giving an account of what it might mean to be initiated into 'the religious life', Gearon gives his interpretation of the demise of 'confessional' religious education in England. His so-called psychological-experiential paradigm is no more than a list of some very diverse approaches to religious education or research relevant to religious education that happen to draw on the discipline of psychology. The historical-political paradigm is a particular *rationale* for studying religion, but not a pedagogy involving a theory of teaching and learning.

Second, of those examples which *could* arguably be described as pedagogies (phenomenological, philosophical-conceptual, socio-cultural), there is no clear temporal sequence in which one 'paradigm' decisively *replaces* another. In various contexts, all of these methodologies are in current use.

Third, Gearon's association of each 'paradigm' with a specific *single* discipline cannot be sustained.

Fourth, Gearon's presentation of the historical-political and the socio-cultural paradigms as *complementary*, shows its incompatibility with Kuhn's view that different paradigms are incommensurable by definition.

Fifth, Gearon makes various false assumptions. For example, with regard to the so-called historical-political paradigm, it does not follow from the fact that researchers consider the relevance of studies of religion to social cohesion, that they must adopt the view that the *only* aim for the study of religions can be the promotion of social cohesion.

Sixth, Gearon's characterisation of different approaches as paradigms includes some inaccuracies and misinterpretations of others' work.

Underpinning Gearon's account of paradigms is the assumption that theory and method grounded in the social sciences, psychology and contemporary philosophy are inherently

secularist, and therefore that these disciplines exhibit an anti-religious bias. The basis of this criticism is the association of such disciplines with the European Enlightenment and its legacy, especially the linkage of disciplines with 'founding' intellectuals whose work, in effect, attempted to explain religion away. However, to claim that *all* subsequent work is inherently secularist because of the origins of the family of disciplines it utilizes ignores on-going theoretical diversity and development *within* the subjects concerned, including continuing debates by those actually working in the fields about their nature and assumptions (Evans-Pritchard 1962; Jackson 1997, 30-32; 2012).

Finally, it is hoped that the above discussion contributes to the debate about the nature and future of religious education. If evaluations of present and past models of religious education are themselves defective, their use in re-thinking the future shape and content of the subject is highly questionable.

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<sup>i</sup> The terms 'confessional' and 'non-confessional' are used since Gearon employs them as part of current British discourse on religious education, in which a 'confessional' approach is one intended to foster some form of religious faith or belonging. However, these terms are used in a variety of ways in different national contexts. The usage here corresponds to that initiated by a Schools Council project on religious education in the early 1970s (Schools Council 1971).