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Understanding Christianity: exploring a hermeneutical pedagogy for teaching Christianity.

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Abstract

Disagreements about how Christianity should be taught in state-funded school RE have a long history. In this article we take England as a case study and examine the debates that have arisen about the legitimacy of a theologically-based pedagogy following the publication of *Understanding Christianity*, a resource inspired by recent developments in academic theological hermeneutics. We particularly focus on the question whether or not pupils should be treated as insiders or outsiders. Drawing on Anthony Thiselton's notion of responsible hermeneutics, we argue that this offers a robust model for an academically rigorous approach to teaching Christianity in schools that enables pupils to be both insiders and outsiders in the hermeneutical process. We then illustrate how *Understanding Christianity* has attempted to embody this aspiration.

Keywords: Bible, confessional RE, pedagogy, responsible hermeneutics, theology, Thiselton, *Understanding Christianity*

Introduction

The approach to teaching Christianity in the context of Religious Education (RE) in state-funded schools in England has undergone significant change and become increasingly contentious since it was enshrined in law in the 1944 Education Act. The debates that have developed are reflected internationally, an example being Skeie's (2017) discussion of shifts in the Norwegian national syllabus in response to intervention from the European Court of Human Rights. We suggest, therefore, that examination of an English case study can cast light on discussions about the teaching of Christianity in state-sponsored RE in other contexts. In this article, we will explore the debate about the appropriateness of theologically-based pedagogy in RE, with particular reference to a new resource called *Understanding Christianity* (Pett et al. 2016). Our aim is to contribute insights that enhance both quality of pupil learning and academic rigour in the teaching of Christianity more generally.

Historical background

Following the Second World War, RE in England was seen by both government and Church as part of the wider educational reform that would build a post-war future for English

citizens. The largely unquestioned assumption at this time was that RE for all would have an exclusively Christian character and would entail faith nurture. The only contentious issue was that it should not favour any particular Christian denomination. The law therefore required a non-denominational approach, which was largely interpreted as being secured by teaching the content of the Bible as the shared text of all the denominations.

This situation prevailed until Ronald Goldman (1964) and Harold Loukes (1961), scholars influenced by developmental psychology, unsettled the consensus. Goldman argued that exposure to explicitly religious material such as the Bible was harmful to younger pupils' development and Loukes raised questions about the relevance of biblical material for older pupils. These two initiated a significant shift towards pupil-centred approaches to RE that focused on their world of experience. A second trigger of change was the growing awareness of religions other than Christianity. This initiated a shift to the phenomenological study of religions (Schools Council 1971). In relation to teaching Christianity, this was exemplified in the Chichester Project (Brown 2000) and marked the beginning of the concern to distinguish between confessional and non-confessional approaches.

These implicit/experiential and explicit/phenomenological emphases were later integrated by Michael Grimmitt (1987) in his influential notion of *learning about* and *learning from religion*. His emphasis was on the personal development benefits that arise for pupils from the study of religion. Another significant response was Robert Jackson's (1997, 2000) interpretive approach that highlighted the contribution of an ethnographic methodology and the importance of carefully interpreting and representing the believer's experience as integral to scholarly rigour in the academic study of religions. However, Jackson also stressed the personal 'edification' that arose for the pupil in such an approach (1997, p.130-4). These discussions about the relationship between the students' personal development and the religious material being studied and about the role of RE as an insider (perceived as religious) activity or an outsider (perceived as academic) activity persist to this day. Responses to them are central to discussions about appropriate pedagogy for RE (Grimmitt 2000).

One result of these developments was that from the 1960s significantly less attention was given to explicit study of the Bible, except in the examinations taken by older students. This began to change again in the mid-1980s with the development of the *Concept Cracking* approach (Cooling and Cooling 1987, Cooling 2000), which argued that contemporary phenomenological approaches were misrepresenting Christianity by not giving enough attention to the central place of theological beliefs in Christians' lives. Drawing inspiration from Jerome Bruner's work on a spiral curriculum, it focused on the development of understanding of certain central Christian doctrines as the key for unlocking meaning within biblical material. It represented an attempt to shift pedagogy towards more explicit emphasis on the religious material, but with attention given to how this supported pupils' personal development. However it was soon questioned whether this theological approach, which depended on teaching knowledge and understanding of what was termed credal orthodoxy, might itself be misrepresenting Christianity by presenting it as a unified, cognitive phenomenon with propositions at its core rather than as a diverse faith, which is practised and experienced in many different ways as well as believed. The response to this was to take

account of the narrative approaches that were becomingly increasingly influential in academic theology and biblical studies (Cooling, 1996, Reed, et al, 2013). A further question raised was whether the approach stepped over the line by treating students as “religious insiders” rather than “academic outsiders” (Alberts, 2007).

Alongside these scholarly discussions, a number of significant reports were critical of the performance of schools in relation to teaching Christianity (e.g. Copley and Walshe 2002, Hayward 2007, Ofsted 2010, 2013, Conroy et al. 2013, Reed et al. 2013, National Society 2014). The varied criticisms include a lack of progressive and systematic investigation of the core beliefs of Christianity leading to an atomised experience and lack of coherence for pupils; limited concern with the theological significance of Jesus’ life and teachings; little in the way of context when looking at biblical texts or their interpretations; the understanding of Christianity rarely prioritised over other sundry/diverse aims and purposes; low academic demand and pedagogy often led by text-books rather than teachers; confusion over purpose such that teachers found it difficult to ‘bridge the gap between immanence and transcendence’ (Conroy et al. 2013, 41). It appears that teachers are still struggling with how to teach Christianity well as an element of state-funded RE.

Understanding Christianity is a response to these discussions that puts theology back into the curriculum. The rest of this article explores how it does this and the justification offered.

Confessional or non-confessional?

On publication, *Understanding Christianity* was greeted with strong criticism from some who argued that its theological approach had no place in the curriculum of state-funded schools (e.g. Howard 2016). One of the oft-used phrases in the debate about the sort of RE that is appropriate for state-funded schools is to characterise it as non-confessional in contrast to approaches that are confessional. It is not often clearly specified what this distinction means in practice, although the concern with confessional teaching appears to be that that it promotes ‘faith development’ whereas non-confessional approaches do not (Baumfield and Cush 2013). Recent European human rights case law has characterised non-confessional RE as ‘critical, objective and pluralistic’ (Skeie 2017; Hendek, 2018). A major concern about *Understanding Christianity* was that, by being theological, it crossed this educational line.

One of the most substantial treatments of this distinction is offered by Wanda Alberts (2007) where she contrasts integrative (non-confessional) and separative (confessional) approaches. The former is, she asserts, ‘the only model in which all children are given a chance to learn from an impartial perspective about different religions’ (351). The assumption is that confessional RE derives its rationale from religious rather than educational motivation, ‘often building on concepts of education and development that are questionable from a non-religious educational point of view’ (348). She expresses the view that, ‘a *solely* separative approach to RE and religious diversity in state schools is irresponsible in our contemporary world’ (350, emphasis mine). Underlying her substantial analysis appears to be the opinion that there are two distinct viewpoints locked in combat over RE; that of the religious believers and that of the non-religious scholars of education. In the midst of a thorough and

often insightful examination of *Concept Cracking* (Cooling 1987, 2000) she therefore asks the rhetorical question: ‘Does not theological exploration already imply a religious view on religions?’ and expresses the concern that this may ‘corrupt the integrative character of the subject’ (205). It therefore appears that Alberts’ concern is not with *solely* theological approaches, but with *any* theological approach.

Alberts’ analysis provides a helpful backdrop to understanding the debates that have arisen about the legitimacy or otherwise of a theological approach to RE. In a significant blog post, reflecting on the Church of England report (National Society 2014) that had some influence in the development of *Understanding Christianity*, Alan Brine makes two points. The first is to emphasise that theological enquiry, as recommended by the report, must be balanced by other approaches in the overall goal of promoting religious literacy. To echo Alberts, it should not be the *sole* way of teaching RE. Second, he reflects on the notion of ‘theological enquiry’, arguing that:

Studying theology is something that goes on inside a religious community. Students of RE should be interested in this process as observers but cannot directly participate in it..... It would be a major concern if attempts were made to distort learning in RE by structuring the whole study of Christianity around a series of theological concepts and processes. That is in danger of privileging ‘theological’ faith above the lived reality of religious life. This of course might be the goal of the religious establishment who want RE to ‘teach’ the faith the way they want it taught. BUT it runs the risk of distorting the core purpose of RE – to engage pupils in **an impartial, objective study of religion and belief**. (Emphases in the original)ⁱ

As with Alberts, it appears that it is not just *sole* theological approaches that concern Brine, but *any* theological approach. The only theology he thinks is legitimate is the phenomenological study of theology as the doctrinal dimension of religion. In a follow-up blog, Brine asks the important question: ‘Is theology part of the subject matter rather than the pedagogy of RE?’ⁱⁱ Theology as pedagogy is a religious activity and is not, in his view, acceptable. Theology as part of the subject matter in a religious studies pedagogy is, however, appropriate. We also see echoed the other concern that Alberts voiced about confessional approaches, namely a suspicion that the religious establishment is hijacking RE for faith formation. The ‘demon of confessionalism’ⁱⁱⁱ worries a lot of people. Theology, apparently, is for insiders. RE is, apparently, for outsiders. The assumption appears to be that only outsiders can be ‘critical, objective and pluralistic’. Brine’s criticisms are of particular significance given his previous role as the lead inspector for RE at Ofsted, the official school inspection agency in England whose 2010 and 2013 reports set out some problems with the teaching of Christianity that *Understanding Christianity* was developed to address.

The question is then whether there is an approach to *theology as pedagogy* that answers these concerns and offers a model that can legitimately be used in teaching Christianity in state-funded schools. *Understanding Christianity* is based on the proposal that there is. In the rest of this article we will argue that drawing on the insights of contemporary hermeneutical scholarship in theology offers such a model.

Embracing hermeneutical thinking

A recent development in RE is the rising interest in the pedagogical implications of hermeneutical theory (e.g. Aldridge 2015) and, more specifically, in the relevance of hermeneutical theology that engages with narrative approaches to biblical text for RE classrooms (e.g. Reed et al. 2013). Narrative approaches regard the overall story that the Bible tells of the significance and meaning of human life as its fundamental feature. For narrative theologians, the act of biblical story-sharing is what characterises the Christian community and shapes the experience of the Christian way of life. To engage in narrative theology is not just a cognitive academic exercise, but is also personally formative. The question is whether such narrative formation can be educational and therefore appropriate for state-funded schools. Or is it just a sophisticated form of confessional religious instruction? Has it achieved an appropriate balance between students being insiders and outsiders?

Following research revealing how difficult teachers find it to get school pupils to engage with the Bible, Julia Ipgrave (2013) argued that these narrative approaches had considerable educational value in their focus on the reader/text relationship. However, a key challenge that Ipgrave identified was that ‘the assumption of many that belief is a precondition of theological understanding influences opinion on the value of Biblical learning’ (270). Ipgrave challenges this assumption by drawing on the hermeneutical work of Paul Ricoeur who advocates a relationship between the reader and the text ‘where neither reader nor text dominates but both are afforded freedom for the expansion of meaning’ (274). In effect she argues that pedagogically it is possible for students as academic outsiders to learn from the Bible as insiders with personal integrity, without being treated as *Christian* insiders. She is therefore arguing that pupils can be personally edified by, or learn from, the activity of theological study in a way that is appropriate for their own religious or non-religious identity.

In order to develop this notion of outsiders as insiders, we will discuss the work of Anthony Thiselton in theological hermeneutics (e.g. 1992, 2005, 2009), who draws extensively on academic scholarship in philosophical hermeneutics. His work on reading biblical text is therefore a case study of wider discussions of reading texts generally and helps answer the question of what a rigorously academic and scholarly approach that embraces insider-ness looks like. Thiselton’s concept of ‘responsible hermeneutics’ seeks to do this. He focuses on the question ‘exactly what are we doing when we read, understand and apply texts?’ (2009, 4) as the central issue for hermeneutics, which it is also for pedagogy according to Michael Grimmitt (2000). Being literate about the reading process means, Thiselton argues, that every reader should be aware that they approach the text with a ‘pre-understanding’, which he describes as ‘an initial and provisional stage in the journey towards understanding something more fully’ (12). Here he is simply affirming the widely-accepted hermeneutical insight that everyone approaches text from the vantage point of their own worldview. There is therefore no such person as a purely-objective or fully-neutral, critical reader. Encountering a text is always a partly-subjective, interpretive process of constructing meaning that draws on one’s own worldview, reflects one’s cultural situatedness and, often, serves one’s own interests. Part of the rigour of academic reading of texts is then to take account of the *insiderly and personal* nature of one’s *outsiderly and academic* approach as a scholar. Thiselton’s view is

that the existence of pre-understanding is simply a fact of life, namely that we all interpret from somewhere; he argues that this is not inherently threatening to the enterprise of responsible hermeneutics, but it does have to be taken into account. In order to be critical, objective and pluralistic it is essential to embrace and be reflexive about one's own pre-understanding.

An intriguing example of how the context-derived, pre-understanding of the reader affects how people interpret texts is given by Mark Allan Powell (2004, 265-287). In an experiment, he asked 100 American seminary students to read carefully the text of the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32, then to retell the story to partners, and then check to see how accurate their interpretations were. He found that all his students mentioned the younger son squandering his wealth, but only six students mentioned the famine that occurred when the younger son was in the far country, having lost his money. Powell repeated the experiment with 50 students in St Petersburg, of whom 17 mentioned the squandering but 42 specifically mentioned the famine. Powell argues that the American students have no experience of famine, and so ignore that detail as extraneous; they see the boy's poverty and need as the result of his own irresponsible and (they assume) wicked behaviour. The Russian students, however, have a national memory of famine, notably the 900-day siege of Leningrad (St Petersburg) by the Nazis in World War II when 670,000 people died of starvation. For them, the famine was a significant detail; for them, the boy's poverty was a result of his thinking that money was all he needed, not his family: his sin was self-sufficiency. Powell suggests that this omission of the context of the famine in Western interpretations turns the parable into a tale of moral repentance rather than one where a boy (like the coin and sheep earlier in Luke 15) is lost and recovered (2004, 285). In contrast, Powell (2007) describes how a group of Tanzanian seminary students emphasised the failure of the society in the far country; the younger son is starving because the community do not feed him, the lost alien in their midst. They contrast this callous disregard for the boy's well-being with the generosity of the father's house, understood as representing the 'kingdom of God'.

Thiselton's notion of responsible hermeneutics therefore stresses the importance of holding two activities in balance, which together enable the learner to participate in the oft-discussed hermeneutical circle. These are the hermeneutics of retrieval, where the reader seeks to discern the intended meaning of the text through critical study of its background, language, symbols, metaphors, meanings, narratives and pre-understanding(s) of the author, and a hermeneutics of suspicion where the pre-understanding and interests of the reader and his/her shaping community/ies are examined (2009, 19). In making this observation, Thiselton therefore highlights the importance of taking into account two horizons; namely that of the text and that of the reader. Central to responsible hermeneutics is that the conclusions reached by interpreters on the basis of the horizon of their pre-understandings are ultimately constrained by the results of the retrieval process undertaken on the horizon of the text. The text cannot legitimately, therefore, be made to mean simply anything (2005). Responsible hermeneutics therefore rejects radically constructivist approaches such as reader-response theory that maintain that the meaning of any text is in the gift of the reader. There are therefore certain virtues that need to be cultivated by readers when reading texts responsibly,

one of which is the humility of careful listening (Briggs, 2010, Vanhoozer, 1998). These theological virtues are not uniquely Christian virtues for Christian insiders, but rather the interpretive virtues required of every scholar in the rigorously academic, scholarly work of responsible hermeneutics. They are therefore legitimately required of all pupils. Ipgrave makes a similar point when she argues:

Readers may bring prior experiences and understandings to the text but to make the most of this encounter and invitation they need to open themselves to new meanings, to the refiguration of their experience of being-in-the-world that may result (Ricoeur 1994); in Ricoeur's words, the reader needs to exchange the 'me, master of itself' for the 'self, disciple of the text' (Ricoeur 1991, 37). This dual action, the text's disclosure and reader's opening out, takes place in a space 'in front of the text'. (2013, 275)

Responsible hermeneutics is then an academically rigorous theological approach that takes seriously the interaction between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader that characterises any reading act. It emphasises two academic responsibilities. The first is to rigorous textual scrutiny in the quest to retrieve the meaning of the text as constructed by the author and by the Christian community in its subsequent reflection on that text (the hermeneutics of retrieval). The second is to rigorous reflection on the contemporary context so that the influence of the pre-understandings of different readers is discerned and the significance and application, if any, of the retrieved meaning for those readers is carefully reflected upon (hermeneutics of suspicion). This process of reading is inevitably formative as it demands reflection on how the retrieved meaning of the text might or might not have significance for the reader given their own pre-understanding. For those pupils that are part of the Christian community, such formation might well be faith-formation. For others it will not. Indeed there is no reason why a legitimate outcome of responsible hermeneutics should not be the conclusion that the meaning of the text has no significance at all for the reader. The point is that such a conclusion has been reached through the rigorous academic process of responsible hermeneutics, not through a refusal to engage. The major challenge this approach makes to non-confessional approaches is that the pupil is not treated as an objective observer who operates as a disinterested, impartial outsider, but rather as an active participant in the insider activity of interpretive meaning-making in response to their study of Christianity. In this way, responsible hermeneutics can provide a pedagogy, not just an object for study. And that may mean that pupils will be influenced personally by what they study. But to assume that only dispassionate, distanced study is truly educational is to make unwarranted assumptions about the nature of academic rigour and the (im)possibility of being entirely dispassionate and distanced.

Theology understood as responsible hermeneutics can, then, be both an insider and outsider activity. It does not have to be reduced solely to being an object of study, but can, quite legitimately, be pedagogy. Responsible hermeneutics is then *one* tool in the RE teachers' pedagogical toolbox to be used alongside others that might be derived from sociological, philosophical or other disciplines. The judgement about the appropriate balance is teachers'

professional responsibility. The importance of responsible hermeneutics for this discussion lies in its offering an educational approach to the Bible which breaks through the confessional/non-confessional binary by acknowledging the interaction between being insider and outsider that is integral to scholarly reading of a text. Pupils must make their own interpretations and construct their own meanings. However this is not the same as hermeneutical licence and responsible hermeneutics requires respectful listening to the text. As Thiselton argues, in an academically rigorous and responsible engagement with the text, the Bible cannot just mean whatever we want to make it mean (2005). In a climate where radicalism is an ever present threat, and learning to accept and live well with diversity is essential to life as a British citizen, an approach which emphasises the importance of responsible interpretation when reading religious texts and of listening carefully to the interpretations of others has a significant contribution to make to promoting community cohesion. In the rest of this article we illustrate how *Understanding Christianity* seeks to fulfil this conception of an appropriate theological approach for state-funded RE.

Understanding Christianity: responsible hermeneutics in the classroom

Selecting content

Within the constraints of time available in school RE timetables^{iv}, the selection of content is itself part of a hermeneutical pedagogy. The content for *Understanding Christianity* was selected by drawing on the insights of narrative theology to identify eight core theological concepts, (God, creation, fall, people of God, incarnation, gospel, salvation and kingdom of God), selected as reflecting a widely-accepted metanarrative within a Christian worldview. *Understanding Christianity* builds a spiral curriculum around these eight theological concepts with the intention of offering pupils an account of these central ideas that many Christians have drawn from their key text and traditions. The approach explores these theological concepts because they unlock some core ideas and practices of Christianity.

The resource is clear that this selection of key concepts, and their descriptions, does not offer the *only* selection or account possible. Indeed, the selection of concepts consciously reflects a perspective in itself, in that these concepts tell a story from creation, through fall, to a salvation offered through Jesus as God incarnate. This is *a* way of reading the diverse biblical texts as part of a metanarrative of salvation that is shared by many Christians, but it is certainly not the *only* way. Therefore *Understanding Christianity* offers older pupils opportunities to examine some alternative ways of describing the core concepts, or alternative selections of concepts, to reinforce their understanding that Christians themselves understand Christianity in diverse ways. The resource helps pupils to understand that this telling of the story is based on an interpretation arising from a particular perspective, and that changing the perspective can change the interpretation.

Identifying where the key concepts fit into this wider salvation meta-narrative helps teachers and pupils to locate the texts and teachings within a wider framework, overcoming the

criticisms of an unsystematic and atomised curriculum made up of unrelated Bible stories, Christian concepts and practices (Hayward 2007, Ofsted 2010). Developing interpretations within this salvation meta-narrative illustrates for pupils that a text cannot legitimately or responsibly be made to mean anything (Thiselton 2005). However the pedagogy of *Understanding Christianity* offers a model of engagement that liberates them to engage in critical enquiry while also allowing the text the potential to expand their view of the world.

The pedagogy

Understanding Christianity is rooted in the ideas of responsible hermeneutics. This is reflected in its pedagogical approach that incorporates three elements: *making sense of the text*, *understanding the impact* and *making connections*.

Making sense of the text offers a way into the selected core theological concepts by drawing on the established principles of responsible hermeneutics (Ipgrave 2013, Gooder 2008). Across the age ranges and the key questions explored, it asks pupils to consider ‘behind the text’ questions (to do with authorship, sources, context, the community for whom the text was written and the reliability of the text, etc.), ‘within the text’ questions (exploring the meanings of words and texts in context, interpretations and responses etc.) and ‘in front of the text’ questions (exploring the relationship between the text and the reader, and how our personal context affects how we interpret a text). Following Ipgrave’s use of Ricoeur, this last strand encourages pupils to allow the text to speak for itself, so that the text can disclose a new world that the reader can inhabit, opening themselves up to new meanings that the text ‘unfolds, discovers, reveals’. Mirroring Thiselton’s hesitancy, Ipgrave rejects

the ready correlation of criticality and scepticism in some RE, the sense that the application of critical thinking to a text necessarily entails scepticism about the text itself, rather than allowing the text to speak, hearing its story, engaging with the challenges and puzzles it proposes to the reader, and letting new understandings emerge (276).

Allowing pupils to open themselves up to the text does not prevent critical thinking. Rather it recognises that both the text and the reader have a voice in the hermeneutical process. For example, when exploring Genesis 1 across the age range, pupils are encouraged to explore the following kinds of questions:

Behind the text	Within the text	In front of the text
<i>Who wrote Genesis 1? When? What’s the relationship between oral transmission and the editorial process of setting it down? Why was it recorded in this way?</i>	<i>How is Genesis 1 structured? Why is it structured this way? Are there any clues in the text about its purpose? What does the language reveal about the character</i>	<i>How do people read this text differently? Why? What effect does this text have on others and on me? What affects my reading of this text? What ideas do I bring to the text?</i>

<i>How does it relate to other stories from the ancient near east? What are the implications of these relationships?</i>	<i>of Elohim? What clues are there as to the intended message of the text?</i>	<i>What difference does it make to sit under or stand over the text? Why?</i>
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This structure of questions is balanced throughout the resource, and explored through a range of tasks and activities. It is designed to help pupils to see how Christian belief and practice emerges from a process of interpretation, reflection, debate and (sometimes) agreement. It gives pupils a chance to participate in an interpretive cycle for themselves, balancing the two horizons of text and reader, but also to understand how and why Christians interpret their texts differently at different times and in different contexts. It encourages them to see what difference it makes if someone ‘stands over’ the text or ‘sits under’ it. These draw the attention of the pupil to the position someone takes to the text; standing over implies a reader’s critical, evaluative perspective on the text; sitting under implies allowing the text to be critical and evaluative of the reader. Pupils can recognise that both of these positions are possible for Christian ‘insiders’ and other ‘outsiders’, and that both allow space for critical thinking and even rejection, as appropriate. In this way, it gives pupils a process by which to understand and evaluate Christian interpretations of the text (hermeneutics of retrieval), while recognising that their own ideas also come from a position that can both challenge and be challenged by the text (hermeneutics of suspicion).

The second pedagogical element, *understanding the impact*, encourages pupils to see how Christians live, by connecting with the texts and the theological concepts that can be seen underlying them, but also acknowledging that for some the priority is the living rather than the believing. This addresses the challenge levelled at *Concept Cracking* that it presents Christianity as a unified set of beliefs rather than seeing it as living diversity, by examining diverse ways in which Christian ways of living reflect Christian beliefs and practice. In this way, it extends the study of Christianity beyond the study of theological concepts through biblical texts to the study of the lived reality of faith in the lives of Christians from a range of traditions. It also gives opportunities for pupils to explore ways in which Christian belief and practice have had an impact on the world, and the influence of Christian thought on twenty-first century thinking and living.

The third pedagogical element, *making connections*, explores the connections between texts and their impact in the lives of Christians, between pupils’ understanding of diverse, living Christianity and of other religious and secular worldviews, and between Christian understandings of, and responses to, the world and human existence and pupils’ own understanding(s). It thus puts the hermeneutical process into action for the pupils themselves. They are enabled to make connections between texts/beliefs and impact/actions, and between a Christian view of the world and other worldviews, including their own. This element consolidates learning by helping pupils to make connections between ideas studied, thereby promoting ‘deep learning’ (Willingham 2009). It also draws on the personal development ideas of personal and impersonal evaluation (Grimmitt 1987) and edification (Jackson 1997),

allowing pupils to challenge the ideas studied, and the ideas studied to challenge their own thinking. Thus it gives opportunity for ‘educational formation’, where the pupil has agency in reflecting on any possible significance of what they have learned for their own understanding of self, others and the world (Cooling 2017).

As an academic pedagogy, *Understanding Christianity* does not, therefore, simply involve pupils in a passive or purely objective acquisition of knowledge about how Christians interpret texts and how they live. Rather, it involves pupils in the interpretive *process* of responsible hermeneutics that shows that we all stand somewhere, that we all approach texts from our own perspective, and that none of us is a neutral, impartial ‘outsider’. For example, picking up our earlier discussion of Mark Powell’s treatment of parables, pupils are encouraged to explore what difference it makes if the title of the parable is changed. What interpretations are encouraged if the parable is called The Prodigal Son or The Wasteful Son (the American interpretation); or The Lost Son or even The Foolish Father (for allowing his son to break family ties, reflecting the Russian interpretation), or the Careless Country (reflecting the Tanzanian emphasis)? What difference does it make if people call it the Parable of the Forgiving Father, or The Two Lost Sons? (Bowie 2016). Consideration of these interpretations reminds pupils of how their own context can affect their reading, while emphasising that other people also interpret from within their context, clearly an important lesson for pupils when negotiating different viewpoints in the rest of life.

This pedagogic approach enables pupils to move between insider and outsider relationships with the text in a reflexive and critical process. Pupils do not, then, just learn information, but respond to the text and see how others respond and explore how that difference depends on the person’s context. In this way, the pupil becomes an academic participant in the process of reading and interpreting texts, not simply an observer. In this understanding, being academic is to be able to work within this hermeneutical circle, rather than claim a neutral objectivity. Pupils can then explore how people live in the light of their readings of texts, and how pupils’ own readings are influenced by (and sometimes go on to influence) their own thinking and living. This hermeneutical process applies beyond encounter with biblical texts: it applies to encounters with other texts, whether religious or not. The term ‘text’ can also be widened to encompass, for example, film, art, architecture, ritual and actions. Developing this interpretive skill and awareness is thus part of educational formation, preparing pupils for encounters with beliefs, ideas and behaviours in the wider world. Its academic aim is to develop skilled, responsible interpreters, aware of their pre-understandings, aware of the importance of careful reading and aware that their outsider scholarly approach incorporates and reflects their unavoidable insider personal perspective on what they encounter.

Conclusion

Understanding Christianity gives practical support to the teacher^v by offering a coherent view of Christian belief and practice that can be taught within the severe time constraints of the school RE curriculum in England. It also offers a clear teaching approach, drawing on the insights of hermeneutics, through its three steps of *making sense of the text, understanding*

the impact and making connections. This engagement with text allows pupils to grasp and understand ways in which Christians respond and live, while allowing them to develop their own interpretive skills. This contributes to educational formation as their understanding of Christianity is deepened while allowing them to retain their agency in learning how all of us encounter texts from our own perspective. Developing pupils' understanding of the human activity of interpretation in this way is a contribution to helping them to be skilled navigators of texts, interpretations, attitudes and behaviours within and beyond RE. This academic approach of responsible hermeneutics helps pupils to understand some core Christian ideas and ways of living while allowing them to retain their integrity as learners within a secular society^{vi}.

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ⁱ <http://www.reonline.org.uk/news/alans-blog-thinking-theologically-in-re-part-1-alan-brine/> accessed on 14th December 2017

ii <http://www.reonline.org.uk/news/alans-blog-thinking-theologically-in-re-part-2-alan-brine/> accessed on 14th December 2017

iii <http://www.reonline.org.uk/news/alans-blog-the-opt-out-clause-and-the-demon-of-confessionalism/> accessed on 14th December 2017

iv In England, community schools will be fortunate to have an hour a week to teach RE, with most agreed syllabuses notionally giving Christianity around half of the RE time available. While Church of England schools are encouraged to have up to 10% of curriculum time on RE, and to teach Christianity for up to 66% of their RE time, selection of content needs to take into account the fact that in the majority of schools there will be eighteen hours a year, at best, for teaching and learning about Christianity.

v *Understanding Christianity* comprises 31 units of work for teachers of 4-14s, with teaching and learning strategies, classroom resources, knowledge 'building blocks', age-related outcomes, and specially-commissioned artwork to connect core concepts with the wider salvation narrative. Following research on the best methods of effective training (Coe 2013), primary teachers receive the materials along with around 15 hours of continuing professional development, sustained over at least two terms. This gives primary teachers the chance to interweave training sessions with trialling in their schools, feeding back progress and resolving problems *en route*.

vi The implications of this approach for the wider RE curriculum are under consideration. A study of Hinduism or of secular humanism could not retain the same emphasis on a specific written text, and the Qur'an may not be used in the same way in the classroom, perhaps. However, if 'text' is used, as it is by Gadamer and others, to apply beyond the written word to any object of study encountered by the pupil, the pupil's participation in the process of examining, interpreting and understanding the object of study, within the hermeneutical circle described in this paper, has potential application beyond the study of Christianity in RE.