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Please cite this publication as follows:

Bowie, R. (2016) Doing RE hermeneutically - learning to become interpreters of religion. *RE Today*, 34 (1). pp. 60-62. ISSN 0226-7738.

Link to official URL (if available):

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Doing RE Hermeneutically - Learning to become interpreters of religion

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(First published in *REToday*, Autumn 2016, Vol. 34. No 1, Birmingham: RE Today, pp.60-62)

All we read and see around us is interpreted through a lens made up of many filters: previous experiences of similar situations, traditions, ways of thinking we have adopted, loves and hates. To be bitten by a dog one day leaves one wary of them the next. It is difficult and maybe impossible to access the outside world, except from behind our interpretative lenses. How we make sense of things does not stand neutrally apart from a particular story and this is particularly true for religion as. Maajid Nawaz in a dialogue with Sam Harries discussing difficult texts says:

“Religious doesn’t inherently speak for itself; no scripture, no book, no piece of writing has its own voice. I subscribe to this view whether I’m interpreting Shakespeare or interpretation religious scripture.” (*Islam and the future of Tolerance: A dialogue*, 2015, USA, p.5)

How can we discern a little more about these interpretative lenses and why might it be useful to do so?

It's comforting to think what we see is a picture of what is objectively out there. It's easier not to bring out our intentions, motivations, hopes and fears when we read or see something and make sense of it. One worry hermeneutists have is that when texts are read people see what they want to see. Many scholars in RE have illuminated aspects of the role of interpretation, notably Robert Jackson (*Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach*. 1997. London, Hodder & Stoughton) and recently David Aldridge (*A Hermeneutics of Religious Education*. London: Bloomsbury).

One problem for many RE teachers, when it comes to making sense of religion, is that they may have never studied biblical interpretation. Theology and Religious Studies degrees sometimes skip over it. For sociologists, psychologists, philosophers and others, the implicit lens for making sense of religion comes from their *home* discipline, and those disciplines provide a valuable mode of interpretation but these are different from hermeneutics. They cast the way in which religion is understood and the process of understanding religion through their own distinguished but different reasoning traditions. Changes in A Level and GCSE bringing religion to the foreground more directly so approaching study in RE, and especially Christianity requires a stronger engagement with this hermeneutical challenge. RE often expects learners to give reasons to justify arguments or viewpoints. The sort of reason given reveals the sort of reasoning tradition, and how religion is interpreted.

Biblical scholars can help us here. They can help us shift the approach from delivering views of religion to children to empowering learners to see themselves as interpreters of religion - as hermeneutists. There are many principles to help on the hermeneutical journey - these are a few. It makes most sense if you can get a copy of biblical stories referred to while you read this section, to see the bigger picture.

Beware seeing only what others have told you to look for. Look for subversion of expectation in texts.

In Christian term the New Testament is supposed to be a new revelation, a Good News. How can such *News* be read when we have already heard other people telling us what it means? How do we avoid simply reading into the text what we have *heard before*. One strategy to help challenge this is to make sure we focus on texts which are not quite "right". Lets call them problem texts.

The Pharisee and the tax collector is one example (Luke 18:10-14). The Pharisee trots out his self righteous prayer. We know about these types in the New Testament – Pharisees are definitely the bad guys. Essentially this is a moral warning – be humble before God to be saved, not self righteous.

Here's the problem. Is the self righteous prayer all that bad? Is hiding at the back all that good? The disciples would have probably recognized that type of prayer. Bible interpreters tell us it is similar to prayers they would have known and said. They may have identified much more closely with the Pharisee than the hated tax collector. However, Jesus deliberately exonerates an immoral person, a tax collector who seems humble but gives no indication he has changed his ways - yet receives Jesus' blessing.

The morally good are bad and the morally bad are good. This is subversive. This feels all wrong. The danger for the classroom and indeed the pulpit is to attempt a tidy up operation - to emphasis how that Pharisee really was terribly bad because arrogance is worse than tax corruption. Probably best to avoid the fact that though the sinner seems aware of his sin, nothing seems likely to be changing on his part.

The story can't just be about being humble and not self righteous. The moral indignation of those who listened to this type of story would come from the matter that **everyone can be saved**, even those who are hated for their corruption. This is subversive and positively anti social. Jesus' idea of salvation is ludicrously open handed.

Read texts through different perspectives

Hermeneutists worry that we tend to project into texts our our preferences, dreams and ideas. So in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) maybe we project in a kind of heroic role for ourselves. We see it as a story about helping people, even people who are different from ourselves. We take from it a message of looking out for the person in need so we can help them. We are thinking rich perspective here. We do the brave thing. We reach out to the poor miserable outside. We make sure he is looked after with our ample wealth and openheartedness. Poor perspective might see the story rather differently. Poor perspective might see in the Samaritan Christ's saving hand. Poor perspective might feel utterly trampled on the side of the road (maybe by some of those rich types the story points out as well). People in poorer circumstances see things differently. Maybe the meaning is about Christ saving us in a guise of this impossible hero. Maybe it has this other meaning as well as the moral one about helping others and goodness coming from unlikely places.

But here's another thing that's a bit odd about that story. Jesus seems to have gotten it wrong. If he wanted to convey an idea of the virtue of charity that reaches across difference, then surely the Good Samaritan should have been a sort of common Jew, rather than a pious Jew, and the man beaten up should've been the Samaritan. That would lead to the kind of meaning often drawn out of the story, much better than the version that god told. So the moral message isn't enough. Something else is going on. Does salvation come from beyond ourselves, not within? Are our expectations of moral conduct always confounded?

Read texts in context

That means spending some time on longer extracts and researching the historical and cultural setting of the text. Now there are many different ways texts can be explored as Christians practices of worship, prayer and discernment do take very short elements of texts.

Don't rip texts out of context and twist them into a convenient meaning. This can lead to things in the text being missed. A classic example is the widows mite, or coin. Jesus and his disciples are near the temple and a poor widow is seen giving her last coin to the temple treasury (Mark 12:41-44). This is often portrayed as the poor women setting an example of great sacrifice and faith. So we can stop there. We have the meaning. It's about trusting God, having faith, putting everything into His hands. Now those sentiments are found elsewhere the New Testament

However, look again, this time at Mark 12:38-13:2. Just before this moment, Jesus is speaking in a way that sounds critical of the treatment of widows and how they are vulnerable to immoral religious types who want to steal their money. Right after the text Jesus declares that the Temple, where the treasury the woman has just donated to is located, will be utterly destroyed. Now things seem rather different. Maybe Jesus' words are a warning story about misplaced trust in established religion, rather than God! There is something about the abuse of authority over the vulnerable here. This is a more complicated and troubling.

Hermeneutists often say that it is mistake to simply think in terms of right and wrong meanings, but rather that it is important for interpreters to see a more rounded set of understandings of the passage, alongside the many other passages of the bible before making too strong a claim to a single *best* meaning.

Be wary of titles

Titles are one way of framing the whole text. It is important to note that the titles in the Bibles we have today have been added. In the previous example, the introduction of the title before the story of the Widow separates it in our mind. The changes in chapter numbering fractures off the next part of the text from our view. Titles can set the whole story and inform different interpretation of a text. A bit like a Headline, it can sway how the whole thing is interpreted. A most famous example is with the Lost son (Luke 15:11-32, or is it the forgiving father, or the two lost sons, or the divided family, or the foolish father (I have invented these, perhaps your students could think of some more)?

- If the story is **the lost son** then it is a story about misspent use, realisation of past errors and reconstitution into the family.
- If it is about **the forgiving father** then it is a story of bereavement and rediscovery.
- If it is about **the two lost sons** then perhaps it is about family dramas and dynamics, things that are healed and things that are never fully healed.

The power of titles can be revealed by looking at headlines from newspaper articles which say different things from the articles themselves. The Sun Newspaper's 'Queen Brexit' headline ruled was labelled 'misleading' recently for doing this. Headlines and titles immediate cast an impression.

Use the active imagination to engage with texts.

What frame of mind should we take when reading texts? Should we see them as ancient sources to be studied in university libraries texts of guidance for a sort of moral court of law? What frame of mind should we adopt before stepping into the text.

There is a well known approach to RE called the experiential approach (<http://re-handbook.org.uk/section/approaches/experiential-re>). It draws heavily on what Jung called the active imagination and what many religious traditions developed particular practices in. Ignatian Spiritual Exercises use an imaginative entry into the text in a conscious, attentive and calm state, usually achieved through some stilling activities. These sorts of exercises are also used in drama to help enter a character or scene. Mindfulness meditation also uses them. There need be nothing remotely indoctrinatory or subversive in doing them in RE learning contexts.

Active imagination can bring a receptiveness to illumination and insight usually linking the personal experience of the individual to some kind of encounter with the text. Sometimes a narration (or guided fantasy) is read out loud, empathizing touch and feeling, the sense of what is happening. This aids the imagination which then takes a role in filling out the picture. Then a short extract of sacred or other situational text, poem, song etc, can be read followed by open questions to ask how the student feels or responds to the questions, the senses, the experience. Some see this as non-rational and it doesn't fit well with the current educational fad some call the rigour revolution but in hermeneutics, it allows for the person to create a personal dimension to what the text might say to them. Whilst religious communities use sacred texts that they consider authoritative in this manner, the person engaged their active imagination need make no personal religious commitment to the religious tradition. All they need to commit to, is the development of their active imagination. Reasoning is a boarder church than we think.

Some RE teachers are hesitant about this particular hermeneutic, even with the mindfulness revolution taking place in education but not all pupils are used to this kind of learning so perhaps there is a middle ground. Divide your class between those interested in plunging in and those who prefer to take on the role of social scientists to observe, analyse, interview and critique what is going. This is RE. we can have our cake AND eat it.

Summing up

It would be a mistake to read into these ideas a desire for RE teachers to get the right interpretation. That's not my intention. The point is that we should encourage learners to become better interpreters of biblical text and we should start to be more explicit about the methods of interpretation we and they are using. Cultivating different practices of interpretation can help.

Doing bible stories in RE can be seen as a fluffy soft of uncritical kind of activity, not befitting of the rigor revolution of today's education – not as robust as good old philosophy. Maybe this is because too often learners were given preconceived, simplified and fixed summative meanings of text, rather than encouraged to practice the development of inference. Of course there are good reasons to try and help children to become familiar with the bible, but doing RE Hermeneutically means we need to discover a critical edge to interpreting sacred texts, and for Pupils and teachers alike, that means we need to cast ourselves not as objective observers of the phenomena but active interpreters of the mystery.

What can we take from this?

1. Look out for subversive uncomfortable or interruptive meanings in texts and see them as entry points into discussion. What is uncomfortable about it? What norm is being interrupted?
2. Avoid adopting preconceptions about the meaning of a story, especially when it comes to who the bad guys are and who the good guys are. Reverse our preconceptions, look for the reasonable reason to argue with what has been said. For instance, imagine the Pharisees have got a really good reason to be arguing against what Jesus has said to really capture just what it is Jesus has really said.
3. Read texts in context, try to get inside what is really going in the narrative and historical context that the story was told through. Experiment with context. Give students different lengths of story to read and reflect on and then compare their different readings. For instance for the Widow's mite give one group Mark 12:41-44 and another group Mark 12:38-13:2. Ask them to suggest what their stories might mean, get them to share them and maybe swap texts.
4. When your student says, I don't get this story, it doesn't make sense, it seems so unfair - she may well be onto something - encourage that line of thinking - often the result of a story in the gospels is an argument. Don't explain that away.
5. Give students different vignettes of people who are reading a bible text you have chosen, and ask them to try to imagine how those Christians in their different circumstances or with their different personalities might see meanings in the text. Think of socio economic circumstances and readers who have experienced different things in their lives.
6. Play with titles - offer multiple titles, invite new titles, encourage students to discover how titles can frame and lead towards some inferences and meanings and how different titles can reveal new inferences and meanings. Give untitled selections of texts which don't follow traditional Bible chapter breaks and ask student to invent titles and give reasons for them to reveal their interpretative lens.
7. Employ the active imagination for a more personal contextualisation in encounters with texts.

In RE I think it's time to row out into deeper water with those texts. So encourage your pupils to get rowing.

To go further

Many of the examples I have written about come from Antony Thiselton's works, especially *Thiselton on Hermeneutics: Collected Works with new essays* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2006) which is a tremendous volume of 800 pages or so. It provides countless examples like the ones I have referred to but is no weekend read. He has also written a good introduction (*Hermeneutics*, Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009) which gives a solid account of many models of interpretation including good chapters on feminist and liberation theology hermeneutics (useful if you are dealing with new A Level Christianity). Stephen Fowl's *Engaging Scripture: A model for theological interpretation* (USA, Wipf and Stock, 2008) is a shorter read with a great discussion in Chapter 2 of how to get round the problem of whether you should teach a preconceived meaning or any meaning – he thinks you need to make clear your intentions behind the meaning you infer and I agree.