**Interpreting texts more wisely: A review of research and the case for change in English Religious Education**

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In Ed John Shortt and Ros Stuart-Buttle (Eds) (2017) *Christian Faith, Formation and Education*. Palgrave macmillan: Chan Switzerland, pp.211-228.

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1. **Introduction**

This chapter reviews research since 2000 that identifies weaknesses in the teaching of religious texts and Christianity in English schools. Religious education (RE) lessons are not encouraging students to read the Bible wisely. This is important and significant because RE in England has changed to more sharply focus on the study of religion at exam level (DfE, 2015). That new policy could amplify existing weaknesses unless changes are made to address the issues identified. Hermeneutics, as exemplified by the protestant scholars Thiselton, Wright and Ford, as well as official Catholic documents offer insights into wiser explorations of the Bible. RE scholars offer similar insights around the place of interpretation in education. This chapter identifies for the first time, the striking degree of consistency around hermeneutics and interpretation between important and influenced theological and educational writers in faith and education contexts. It concludes by asking whether it is time for a more radical change to RE that moves away from studying religion and towards studying wisdom texts. It considers *Understanding Christianity’s* focus on ‘virtuous readers’ (Pett, 2016) as an illustration of one response to the issues identified.

Religious education (RE) in state funded English schools is compulsory. In 2016 over 284,000 secondary age students took public exams in Religious Studies ([http://www.jcq.org.uk/examination-results/gcses)](http://www.jcq.org.uk/examination-results/gcses%29). The most popular options in the content of these exams has tended to focus on ethics and philosophy (Horrell and Davis, 2014; Conroy et. al., 2013), rather than the study of sacred texts, but new government policy (DfE, 2015) requires a sharper focus on religion. Secondary age students are studying more religion and more Christianity at secondary exam level. However, such a focus is in danger of amplifying weaknesses in the quality of teaching of Christianity found in many studies (detailed below). A key component of those weaknesses is around poor interpretation of text and, therefore, poor approaches to reading the bible. A range of factors interplay to produce this situation including weaknesses in teacher subject and pedagogy knowledge and inadequate resources. However, a review of the research shows the over riding driving influences are the unintended consequences produced by the exam system, weaknesses in published resources and questionable classroom techniques used in responding to standardized of question types. The exam criteria specify what should be studied, the kinds of questions asked and what constitutes a good answer. A second factor is not giving focused attention to the kinds of interpretation relevant to study in RE. This is revealed in weaknesses in how texts are handled. It speaks much more significantly to a more fundamental question about whether learners’ capacity to interpret religion and belief is being developed.

1. **Themes in the research on the teaching of Christianity and the Bible**

A great deal of research has produced important insights into teaching biblical texts and Christianity in English RE classrooms. This has been a focus of many studies including university based research. These include the *Biblos* research project (1996-2004), based at Exeter university in partnership with the Bible Society (Copley 1998; Copley and Walshe 2002; Copley, T., Freathy, R. and Walshe, K. 2004) the UK Research Council funded project *Does Religious Education Work?* (Conroy et al. 2013), a multi dimensional study of RE that took place over a period of five years, as well as more focused small scale studies such as Horrell and Davis’ (2014) study of how the Bible is used in secondary RE. There are other major qualitative studies that have included RE but not had RE as a focus, such as Cooling, Green, Morris and Revell’s work (2016) and also some government funded research into resources (Jackson et al. 2010). In addition, there are the findings of the English school inspection agency, Ofsted (2007, 2010 & 2013) which used to undertake detailed subject level surveys. A number of common themes emerge from these studies. There is a general weakness in the teaching of Christianity as a whole. (Ofsted, 2007, 2010 & 2013). Although Ofsted reports identified examples of good teaching of Christianity they repeatedly found too much poor teaching and many pupils leaving school with a limited understanding. A 2013 report found “teaching about Christianity one of the weakest aspects of RE provision” (Ofsted, 2013, p.9).

Research suggests a significant area of concern is around theological understanding both in terms of lessons and pupil learning. RE teaching is reported as avoiding theological interpretations of text, with pupils failing to achieve a theological understanding of the Bible (Copley 1998, p.16; Copley, C., et al. 2004, p.25; Copley and Walshe 2002, p.29). Ofsted reported finding Bible texts disassociated or decontextualized from Christian beliefs: “Christian stories, particularly miracles, were often used to encourage pupils to reflect on their own experience without any opportunity to investigate the stories’ significance within the religion itself.” (Ofsted, 2013, p.15). Personal responses were not theologically informed or connected (cf. Ofsted, 2010, p.33). Theological concepts were vague or badly explained in text books, leaving readers ‘more confused than when they started’ (Jackson et al. 2010, p.91).

Teachers in primary schools seemed reluctant to address biblical material and learners struggled to achieve a theological understanding of the Bible and were ambivalent to it (Copley, T., Freathy, R. and Walshe, K. 2004, p.9). Teachers presented Biblical narratives to pupils but theological interpretations were not connected to the narratives and secular interpretations were encouraged instead (Copley 1998, p.16; Copley, C., et al. 2004, p.25; Copley and Walshe 2002, p.29).

There seems to be a lack of confidence in the intellectual or educational approach to the bible as a source of study. Teachers in primary schools seemed reluctant to address biblical material and learners were ambivalent to it (Copley, T., Freathy, R. and Walshe, K. 2004). Ipgrave (2013) saw an essential obstacle with teaching the bible as a ‘*behind the text’* concern that learners have, around the texts’ status as a literal truth. She thought this limited its reach beyond the confession.

Research has criticized the resources and exams used in teaching RE. One major project reported that students were aware of a difference between “exam religion” and “real world” religion (Conroy et al. 2013). Students sometimes articulated skepticism about the representation of religion by the text book authors they used. Another major study of resources noted some textbooks ‘did not feel detailed or profound enough in historical and theological areas about Christianity’ (Jackson et al. 2010, p.99).

A specific concern is related to the extent to which diversity within Christianity is explored. Horrell and Davis conclude with the critical observation that the use of texts in examination study fails to adequately represent the diversity of Christian responses to the topic of environmental stewardship (Horrell and Davis 2014, p.82). In some resources single denominational interpretations of Christianity were presented to the exclusion of others (Jackson et al. 2010). A particular problems was perceived around the link between text books and GCSE exams (Conroy et al., 2013, pp.141-167). Key texts are identified by exam boards and written about by examiners, sometimes poorly or incorrectly (2013, pp.147-150).

There are specific concerns about the use of texts. One study documents how sophisticated hermeneutics, for example the historical critical method, was seen to be significantly above what was expected by the GCSEs (Conroy et al., 2013, p.157). Another commonly cited problems is around the use of proof texts with isolated quotes learnt to justify views (2013). Years before, Ofsted had described “standard, mechanistic responses rather than thoughtful engagement with the issues” (Ofsted, 2007, 14). Horrell and Davis’ (2014) study of how the Bible is used in secondary RE found ‘Proof-texting’ in the topic of religion and the environment. Biblical texts are used without interpretation to sustain Christian beliefs about a duty of care to the environment. “RE runs the risk of reducing biblical texts to points of reference that support some aspect of Christian belief, without inviting consideration of the diversity of contemporary Christian perspectives and the extent to which that diversity stems in part precisely from different (often competing) interpretations of biblical texts.” (Horrell and Davis, 2014, pp.76-77). They refer back to Hayward’s study of Christianity almost a decade ago, and her concern that “Learning *that* there are different interpretations held by different groups is not the same as discovering *how* or *why* this is so.” (Hayward, 2006, p.164).

Cooling, Green, Morris and Revell (2016) provide an illustration of the impact of GCSE question structures and poor use of texts. They found that even in schools which chose to focus on exam papers focussed on texts, the exam’s approach emphasised for-and-against arguments so proof texts were deployed as reasons for oppositional beliefs and practices. There was a conflict between what the students were being told was important about, in this case, Mark’s Gospel (such as the announcement of God’s kingdom and the significance of the crucifixion) and the exam (Cooling et. al., 2016, 92). One teacher, when discussing teaching assisted dying, found that her approach was directed towards the exam specification, and the types of question and answers encouraged. She said,

“a Christian wouldn’t necessarily sit there and go ‘fors and against’. We’d actually look at what the Bible would say and the actual meaning and how we talk to people and how we discuss issues with people, looking at it from that angle, rather than the clinical ‘fors and against’” (Cooling et. al., 2016, 79)

She felt the approach lead pupils to “imagine that Christian ethics is primarily concerned with defeating opponents in academic arguments about values” (Cooling et. al., 2016, p.168). Poor approaches to the text leads to poor conceptions of religion. Weak hermeneutics is not simply a matter for sacred texts, but it negatively impact on the engagement with religion as a whole.

Potentially how the Bible is handled in RE classrooms could undermine or support attitudes towards Christianity and Christians. The Biblos study found, “a more positive attitude towards the Bible is associated with a greater level of biblical literacy. RE is crucial here, because more pupils cited RE as a source of biblical knowledge than any other source and it is the only situation in which every child in the UK is inducted into ‘theological’ discourse about biblical narratives.” (Copley, Freathy and Walshe, 2004, p.17; cf Copley and Walshe, 2002, p.29; Copley, 1998, p.16).

These observations point to a problem with the ecology of the education system of government policy, examination boards, publishers and their resources in consolidating these problems or failing to adequately evade or avoid them. A key issue drawing many of these factors together seems to be about the extent to which learning in RE reaches deeper and more complex levels and how exam questions might encourage or discourse such complex intellectual dimensions.

Teachers clearly respond to exams in their teaching drawing on sources as reasons for beliefs and practices. Students learn to connect sources (including textual fragments) and deploy them as reasons for beliefs and practices. The problem with these practices is they do not necessarily encourage multi level deep understandings. They focus student on a composition activity linking sources as reasons for beliefs and practices into pyramids, sometimes with a requirement to construct two divergent constructions of pyramids in opposition to one another. Multiplicity of meaning tends to be conceptualized as opposites or alternatives, not multiple levels that might be simultaneously grasped. Students are simply not asked to explore text fragments in relation to wider narratives of the texts as a whole, let alone in terms of author intentions or contemporary understanding. Beliefs, behaviors and attitudes are depicted as components in pyramids sustained by reasons justified by fragments of texts. Sometimes this is presented as a competition between alternative pyramid structures sustaining opposing beliefs, behaviors and attitudes. Though there are no divisions and differences of this kind in the religious debates, there is also the presence of multiple levels of depth which is a feature of diversity and plurality, alongside dispute and opposition.

1. **Interpretation and Theological Hermeneutics for a wiser reading of the Bible**

Interpretation has often been cited as important part of RE. David Aldridge articulated a conceptualisation of RE as hermeneutics in which “students come into dialogue with religious texts about some matter of shared concern.” (2015, p.185). Interpretation is basic to RE. Jackson advocated interpretative or hermeneutical methods, to develop a kind of grammar, language and wider symbolic patterns of religions as well as the interpretative skills necessary to gain that understanding (Jackson, 1997, 2009) The learner should become self consciously aware of where they were coming from and how they interpreted what they encountered. Learners would become conscious of motives, intentions and identity, as well as ways of thinking when interpreting. Parts of religion are approached in ways dependent on a foreground or project brought to the hermeneutic exchange (Aldridge, 2016, p.184) so becoming aware of this foreground and project matters. But as we have seen, interpretation, and how pupils are taught to read the Bible, exemplifies an aspect of what is poor in the teaching of Christianity and the Bible in government led research (Wintersgill, 2000; Ofsted, 2007, 2010, 2013) and university based research (Cooling, Green, Morris and Revell, 2016; Copley, Freathy and Walshe, 2004; Hayward, 2006, Conroy et al., 2013; Ipgrave, 2013; Horrell and Davis, 2014). The poverty of the situation is such that RE might not only be poor education, but a poor companion for learners seeking to develop a Christian faith, at a crucial time in their lives.

These concerns mirror those identified by scholars of theological hermeneutics concerned with wiser reading of the bible in all contexts, educational and faith developmental. Debate around the use of proof texts in understanding Christianity is ancient. Joyce (2003) and Young (2003) in their discussions around Proverbs 8 describe how it received manipulated interpretations in the Arian controversy as a proof text for the creation of the son, on the one hand, and then on the other through exegetical efforts to rebuke such use. Both sides of that ancient debate used proof texts in an institutional conflict to assert prior positions. Contemporary hermeneutics scholars refer to these issues. Thiselton is concerned about the connection between the reader and the text which can be interrupted by the assertion of prior meanings and interests. Thiselton worries that too often the reader is in fact, “trapped within his or her own prior horizons … for the nature of the reading process is governed by horizons of expectation already pre-formed by the community of readers or by the individual.” (1992, p.8) This leads preachers to draw from texts what they had already decided to say and it leads congregations sometimes to look to biblical readings only to affirm their community-identity and life-style. The Word of God becomes an institutional mechanism to maintain corporate belief and identity. Teaching the bible with preconceived meanings weakens its prophetic power. Preaching the bible slips into social conservation/reproduction. There is no interruption, no innovation or challenge, but rather a process of preconceived self-assurance, self-affirmation and self-protection. This objection is theologically grounded in a concern that the bible should be ‘Good News’, but it has striking commonalities with the concerns in education that the systems of education, such as the assessment and examinations systems, interrupt the encounter with text in the classroom.

Thiselton thought that learning to read the bible better could change the way learners saw the text. Commenting on his own experience of teaching hermeneutics, Thiselton (2009, p.5) found that his students came to read the biblical writings in a different way from before. They learnt, especially from Gadamer, the importance of listening to a text in its own terms, rather than rushing in with premature assumptions or making the text fit in with prior concepts and expectations. They learnt from Ricoeur a healthy measure of critical suspicion of self interest and self-deception. This chimes with another popular writer of commentaries on the Bible and Former Bishop of Durham, N. T. Wright, argues for an approach to bible study that goes ever deeper into the meaning of scripture, to refresh and energise the Church in a way that is free to explore different meanings, not just as a competency for scholars but as a vital ingredient in church: “Any church, not least those that pride themselves on being biblical, needs to be open to new understandings of the Bible itself.” (Wright 2005, p.135). Wright and Thiselton both advocate a kind of responsible hermeneutics which takes seriously the concern to read the Bible in ways that are authentic to Christian faith, and also in ways that are open to new insights (Cooling, 2013). The transfer of fixed, given meanings, superficially pinned to decontextualized quotes will not serve responsible hermeneutics for the congregation or the classroom. There is an alliance of interest between biblical scholars like Thiselton and Wright and educationalists like Aldridge (2015) and Jackson (1997, 2009), around interpretation, or wise reading of the bible, for church congregations as well as state school pupils.

Many of the students studying GCSE Religious Studies are doing so in Roman Catholic Schools. Roman Catholic scholarship in hermeneutics is striking in its plurality embracing multiple approaches to the text and critical in that undertaking. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*" presented by the Pontifical Biblical Commission to Pope John Paul II on April 23, 1993 (as published in Origins, January 6, 1994) is a 62-page essay on different models of interpretation and their relative strengths and weaknesses. The wise engagement with sacred scripture is a high priority and this could be used to form the basis for a consensus around hermeneutics for schools.

There are multiple reasons to encourage multi-layered approaches to text. Bible texts may not be theologically understood, providing only space for preconceived meanings in authorised interpretations (through approved resources or exam question frames). This reduces the likelihood of the enrichment that comes from the deeper engagement with text of the kind Thiselton thought his students experienced. Biblical interpretation slips into knowledge transfer of approved meanings. This undermines the possibility that the bible is Good News, offering something new, prophetic, something unexpected or challenging. The incarnational sense of the text, as it is understood in the Christian tradition, is lost without such readings. Bible study is reduced to preconception transfer rather than inquiry or discovery.

This is not to suggest that interpretations of the text should be relativized or made completely subjective. Too often RE isolates and decontextualises texts away from their historical, linguistic or theological senses. Pupils express concern that they are learning about an exam-religion, remote from their own experience of religion. Religion is cast as a propositional position that is held up by text-as-reason proofs. Thus proof texting encourages single meanings of a text without interpretation. Parables and teachings are deployed to lead to a meaning, attitude or behaviour. Learners are taught *what* the text means, rather than *how* a process of interpretation reaches a meaning. Expected answers do not aid proficiency in interpreting text – quite the reverse. Exams may encourage an awareness of the diversity of interpretations and the associations these have with different kinds of Christianity but this still does not focus on interpretation itself, the *workings out* that have led an interpreter to a meaning, and the possibility of understanding multiple meanings within a theological understanding of the world, rather than simply framing these as oppositional. In these cases the learner’s role becomes not one of interpreter, but rather one of a repeater of known meanings.

This is not so much learning-as-interpretation as learning-as-a-metaphor-for-knowledge -transfe*r* (Hager & Hodkinson, 2009). In this kind of learning, the process of interpretation need not be considered, examined or practiced. Learners are learning what others have interpreted. Interpretation passes out of sight of the learner who neither experiences or participates in interpretation of the kind that is common in Christian life. This is problematic. It means the process of illumination through the examination of text is difficult for the learner to empathise with. They are not practicing a skill that will bring them close to this kind of experience. In addition, any sense of learner-led enquiry is subsumed by a dependency on external judging authorities to confirm or reject an interpretation. Learners cannot *see through the process* so the capacity to evaluate, to weigh up accounts, is compromised. The absence of a focus on ‘good reading’ of the bible undermines opportunities in each of these critical engagements.

These mechanisms can be cast as a response to positivism in education (Cooling, Green, Morris and Revell, 2016, pp.133-135) and the propositional framing of religion in RE (Lewin, 2016) and may also help readers gain some sense of the dramatic narrative of scripture and some sense of how scripture offers insights into experiences of life (Ford, 2007). These would need to be set alongside a range of methodological tools that help learners to acquaint themselves with different ways of reading the bible. A curriculum that enabled learners to be introduced into multiple ways of reading that are authentic to Christian traditions, exploring plain meanings as well as symbolic and metaphorical meanings, grappling with the meaning of a given text in the context of the bible as a whole, and the language and history of the time, as well as the central theologically concepts of Christianity that shaped its development in the early Church. Learners could be introduced to readings of scripture that wise individuals of the past have discerned, and been inspired to live by in response.

 There is a difference between introducing learners to oppositional meanings of texts (such as literal or metaphorical), and introducing them to multiple layers of meaning that contribute to deeper understandings of how texts might be related in different contexts through different processes. Christians may interpret texts symbolically when they pray seeking personal guidance, or worship, seeking through the text an encounter with Christ. They may also interpret them as a code for living when considering specific moral dilemmas. In each case different modes of learning and interpretation take place and the encounter with the text is ‘serving’ or informing different objectives, while at the same time, they live in a community of faith. This moves thinking beyond a binary attitude to the text. If learners consider and explore interpretations and practice processes of interpretation themselves they are more likely to gain some an understanding of why wisdom texts have played important roles in the development of religious thought. Textual interpretation would aid the interpretation of other aspects of religion whilst poor biblical hermeneutics fatally undermines the study of religion, or so it would seem from the many studies.

 Theological hermeneutics offer resources to address the problems of what GCSE exams are currently doing to reading the Bible and seems to be the missing element behind much that the research reveals. For pupils to genuinely learn to interpret religion, they need access to appropriate scaffolds of interpretation and an opportunity to develop a focussed study of interpretation. Biblical hermeneutics offers a way forward.

1. **Is RE turning the hermeneutical corner?**

The urgent need for better methods to read the bible was identified in the Church of England 2014 report *Making a difference A report of the national society*. It concluded RE needed to help pupils improve their ability to “think theologically” and “develop the skills to analyse, interpret and apply the Bible text” (2014, p.37). The concern about the teaching of Christianity and in particular the teaching of Biblical texts resulted in a project which produced *Understanding Christianity*, (Pett, 2016) ([http://www.understandingchristianity.org.uk/)](http://www.understandingchristianity.org.uk/%29) a 2016 resource and pedagogical initiative to improve theological literacy at Primary and Key Stage 3. Coinciding with the launch of *Understanding Christianity* the Church of England articulated a new vision for Education, *Deeply Christian*, *Serving the Common Good* (2016), which identifies wisdom, wisdom seeking, and wisdom literature as central for a better approach to education. Drawing on the work of David Ford, and others, on reading texts, seeking wisdom and scriptural reasoning, it is inspired by principles and approaches that have been developed in ecumenical and interfaith scriptural study contexts (Ford and Stanton, 2003; Ford, 2007; Ford and Clemson, 2013). It summarises, in a footnote, the crucial concern that text should be read and reread in conversation with others, including fellow learners, teachers, and previous generations of readers. (Church of England Education Office, 2016, 14 fn.7). Teaching should inspire these conversations and inspire reading for depth of meaning and wisdom, not simply for pleasure, information, knowledge or assessment.

The Church of England sponsors schools that educate over a million children in England. It aims to improve how children learn to read the bible, seeks to advance a theologically grounded approach to the bible in RE, for all pupils in Church schools, irrespective of their religion or belief. It is a clear example of how seriously the Church takes the problems identified and is an indication of how religion in England is seeking to provide a solution to English RE.

*Understanding Christianity* (Pett, 2016) contains within it a hermeneutical approach to Biblical texts. The curriculum resource outlines learning activities that seek to help learners investigate how Christians use text in different ways and the different ways in which interpretations are made of a text. This includes the context in which it was written, the wider significance and how it relates to other central Christians understandings (p.13). Pett argues poor understanding of a text is a key factor in extremism and that the development of skills in interpretation of texts and in the ways texts are used is important for understanding diversity within religion (p.40). It develops a concept of virtuous readers,

‘there is a particular focus in these resources on developing in pupils the virtues of being good readers: paying careful attention to texts, coming to them with open minds, intellectual curiosity and humility, seeking to find what the text is saying, being aware of different readings, as well as becoming aware of one’s own context and perspective.’ (Pett, 2016, p.41)

Pett encourages learners to explore issues that are ‘behind the text’, ‘within the text’ and ‘in front of the text’ (Pett, 2016, p.11). ‘behind the text’ issues include matters around authorship, sources, context, the community for whom the text was written and its reliability. ‘within the text’ refers to understanding the words themselves in context and ‘In front of the text’ explores the relationship between the text and reader and how different religion and belief perspectives respond. ‘In front of the text’ specifically addresses the possibilities of new insights being seen in the text. This approach is hermeneutically sophisticated drawing on a broad range of the approaches to biblical and literary texts.

Pett argues a broad aim of this approach is to contribute to the development of re-reading as a virtue, expressly encouraging the practice found within biblical texts themselves of returning to read again texts from different perspectives and contexts in search of further engagement and deeper understanding (cf. Benedict, 2007, p.xviii; Fowl, 2008, p.2.3). Pett acknowledges that this development is counter cultural and in opposition to many practices found in RE teaching, such as a focus on reading for an A\* /Grade 9 or the fragmentary attitude to texts in social media (Pett, p.43). Instead he advocates reading for a ‘deeper, slower exploration and engagement’. (p.43)

Drawing on Vanhoozer’s (2002) idea that different Bible genres are different kinds of maps with its own ‘key’ and ‘scale’ for understanding, Pett writes,

‘I wonder if it is helpful to think about the Christian coming to the Bible as a map-reader comes to the world: with certain intentions and for certain reasons. So the reader decides what they are coming to the text for, and treats it accordingly. They might approach the same text with different intentions: from devotional use in private prayer, through to detailed study of the original languages; from devising a systematic theology to preparing a sermon; from singing a psalm in church to defending the Bible against hostile critics. In this metaphor, the readers come to the same text with different purposes, and therefore look at it in different ways.’ (Pett, p.46)

These approaches are developed with examples of engaging specific texts in what is the most developed hermeneutical approach to engaging with biblical texts, in a resource developed for key stage 2 and 3. The level of engagement is sophisticated and is a starting point and an illustration of how it could be possible for learners to be invited to considered multiple approaches to interpreting texts, studied in some detail and at some depth. They are not beyond the reach of learners in secondary or primary schools. Simple techniques could open up texts to interpretative learning. One example encourages young learners could discuss which of these titles might best suite a parable in Luke 15:11-32: *the forgiving father, the lost son, the two lost sons* or *the careless country* for instance, rather then ‘be told what it means’. However, this is only possible with time to study the text in depth. Religious Education would need to give over space for biblical hermeneutics with the hypothesis that the investment would create a capacity for leaners to interpret many different aspects of religion and belief. Behind this suggestion is a calculation that it would be better for RE to narrow the range of content it would try to contain and focus on the development of hermeneutics. Given the problems identified in the research reviewed in this chapter, it is at least worth serious consideration. The potential benefit is that pupils might have deeper and richer conversations around wisdom texts and their interpreters. It encourages a plural engagement with text at multiple layers of depth, not exclusively in oppositional terms. It would create space for learners to engage with each other, teachers, the voices of different Christians and Christian communities and those of other faiths.

1. **Conclusion**

A striking conclusion from the review of research is the extent to which research evidence has failed to make an impact in professional religious education in this specific area of the treatment of texts. Issues and concerns repeatedly identified in different studies demand focussed attention from the stakeholders in the profession to better understood what is going on and how to avoid it. If there are alternative ways of developing learners as wiser interpreters of religion belief, then these need to be identified but there is evidence that the development of wise interpretation is not being sustained by religious education currently. Pett’s (2016) *Understanding Christianity* is an exampleof how richer deeper encounters with biblical literature, wiser readings of the bible, are possible. Whether this key learning goes on to inform a hermeneutically confident the study of religion and belief remains to be seen and may depend upon the extent to which other curricula offers, including those focussed on other religious and philosophical traditions, embrace such approaches.

The new *Religious GCSE subject content* (DfE, 2015) entertains textual studies which engages, ‘the significance, importance and influence of the texts for individuals, communities and societies, how varied interpretations of the meaning of such texts may give rise to diversity within traditions’ and ‘how far communities give authority to such texts especially in relation to other sources of contemporary authority’ (DfE, 2015, p.6). But textual studies are not mandatory. Exam questions structures and answer formulas may dominate classroom learning and may replicate the well documented concerns discussed in this chapter. The ambitions of a richer deeper engagement with textscould be undermined by exam focussed teaching and learning, unless specific steps are taken within the professional stakeholders to avert such an outcome.

This chapter calls for a deeper, sector profession wide change in the ecology of the subject, which, were to come to full fruition, would affect curriculum and exam questions as well as classroom experiences. There is a wide coalition of agreement about the place of interpretation in RE in and many different aims of education might be served by better interpretation. There is a compelling case to examine the effects of better hermeneutics on children and learning, and develop further initiatives to counter system pressures that work against a more educated approach to texts. Ideally wiser reading of wisdom texts could be supported by reoriented system pressures so that supporting scholarly professional practices might be encouraged in the classroom.

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