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RELIGIOUS EDUCATION  
IN  
EARLY CHILDHOOD

A READER

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## Chapter 12

### A Gift to the Child

John Hull

*We worry about what a child will be tomorrow, yet we forget that he or she is someone today.*

Stacia Tauscher

BRITISH RELIGIOUS EDUCATION HAS tended to emphasise curriculum rather than method. This is perhaps because formal control of the subject at least in England and Wales is through local religious education syllabuses, which specify the content which is to be taught. Questions of method are not formally specified. It is left to the local SACRE (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education - every Local Education Authority (LEA) is required by law to set up such a body) and to the professional skill of the teacher. There has, however, been some interest in method, and it must also be remembered that curriculum and method are closely interrelated. When one moves from a mere list of curriculum content to the question of how curriculum content is to be arranged and presented to pupils, in what order and sequence, then the question of method usually arises.

### **Main Methods Used in British Religious Education**

We may distinguish three main methods which are currently used in Britain. First, a number of religions may be taught separately and systematically, one by one. This is often called the systems approach (Teece, 1993; Read, et al., 1992). This is the approach being recommended by the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA, 1994).

Second, there is the thematic or topical approach, in which material is drawn from several religions so as to illustrate a theme. This may be done through subdividing religions into dimensions or types, thus creating thematic categories such as festivals, sacred writings, or worship. This is sometimes called the typological approach (Moore & Habel, 1982; Lovat, 1989). Another approach is to focus upon a theme or an issue such as the destruction of the environment or the preservation of a species of animals, bringing out the teaching of the various religions upon this subject. This kind of thematic or topical arrangement may be described as cross-religion themes (Teece, 1993) to distinguish them from the experiential themes which will be described next. Both the systems approach and the topical/thematic approach are sometimes described as being the phenomenological method, because they have their roots in the use of phenomenology in religious studies (Hansen, 1983; Lovat, 1995).

Third, we have the experiential approach, which seeks to help pupils to understand other religions through developing insights drawn from their own experience of life (Read, et al., 1992). We may distinguish experiential themes from experiential awakening. In an experiential theme, some aspect of secular life familiar to the pupil is used to introduce religious materials. So, for example, the child's experience of having birthday parties may be used to introduce the concept and practice of religious festivals. This is sometimes called the implicit approach, the implicit religious material being distinguished from the explicit material which usually comes later. This may have some connection with the "issues" approach mentioned above, except that the issue does not usually arise out of the personal experience of the pupil but may be something like the approaches of the world religions toward marriage, death or peace, while the experiential themes spring

from the immediate life and context of the pupil. Experiential themes are more common with younger children (Bates, 1992) whilst the issues approach is more frequently found in the upper junior or secondary school (Grimmitt, 1987).

The second type of experiential method is that which I have called "experiential awakening". This is the method advocated by David Hay and his colleagues in the University of Nottingham (Hammond, Hay, et al., 1990) and seeks to awaken pupils or to sensitise them to features of their own lives such as sensitivity to human relationships, awareness of emotions and dreams, and so on. Such insights will be relevant to understanding the intentions and characteristics of religion.

### The Gift to the Child Approach

A distinct contribution to method has been made by a team working in the University of Birmingham, School of Education. The method was developed during two research projects: Religious Education in the Early Years (1987-1989) and Religion in the Service of the Child (1989-1992). A religious item is chosen for presentation to the children. This is called a "numen" or (more simply) a bit of religious stuff. This may be a single word ("hallelujah"), a sound (the call to prayer in the mosque), a story (Jonah and the Big Fish), a page from Holy Scripture (a certain passage from the Guru Granth Sahib), a statue (Ganesha or Our Lady of Lourdes), an aspect of spiritual reality (angels) or even a person (a Buddhist monk). The principal criteria of choice are:

- (i) The material occupies a more or less distinct and autonomous position within the life and faith of the religion, that is, it possesses a certain integrity as a self-enclosed entity.
- (ii) It is charged with numinous power, or with the sense of the sacred or with the power of devotion.
- (iii) It has gifts to offer children.

Possession of the last criterion cannot always be known beforehand but arises out of experience and intuition. Selection of the numena is the result of a process of experimentation in which certain bits of stuff are found to evoke a response and to offer gifts to children whereas others do not seem to do this. This criterion is, in other words, experiential.

### The Engagement Stage

The chosen numen is presented to the children immediately and with a minimum of preparation and explanation. These opening moments, during which the attention of the class is captured, are called "the engagement stage". Questions such as the familiarity of the children with the material and the method and the immediacy of the material must be considered. A couple of examples of engagement situations may be given.

When we first presented Ganesha, the Indian and southeast Asian elephant-headed god, to children aged three, we wondered how to introduce a figure so strange to the children. Ganesha is usually shown accompanied by a little bandicoot or rat and has a snake curling around his plump stomach. He has four arms and holds objects in his four hands. Thinking in the familiar experiential terms, we asked what these young children would already know of elephants in their homes, and we remembered that the elephant is a popular children's toy. We therefore hid toy elephants in a box under the children's table and in the pockets and sleeves of the teacher. The children were asked to search for these and to arrange them on the table in the form of a procession. We then sang the popular children's song about Nellie the Elephant who ran away from home and joined the circus. Not until then did we introduce the figure of Ganesha.

After reflection, this elaborate introduction seemed to be quite unnecessary. Why not let Ganesha speak for himself, immediately? The next time we introduced this topic to a group of children, we placed the statue of Ganesha on a beautiful silver tray, hidden under a velvet bag. As the bag was slowly lifted up, the children were invited to identify what they saw. First there was the rat or mouse or bandicoot, then the snake, and finally, with gasps of delight and surprise from the children, the figure of Ganesha was fully revealed. No introduction was necessary. The engagement period consisted of nothing more than the unveiling of the statue.

The Muslim call to prayer, the *azan*, which summons believers to prayer in the mosque, presented difficulties of a different kind. "Come to prayer! Come to salvation! God is most great! There is no God but God!" The problem is that the chanting or calling of the Arabic words sounds strange to the western child. We were afraid that the children might laugh or that any Muslim children might be embarrassed. We therefore created a slightly more careful engagement experience, in which the teacher entered the classroom with a number of instruments or appliances which create a warning sound. The telephone rings. What do you do? You leave your work or play and run to the telephone or to call your parents. You are playing in the school yard when the teacher rings the bell. What do you do? You stop your game and line up outside the door of the classroom. You are about to cross the road at the pedestrian lights when suddenly you hear the sound of a fire engine coming. What do you do? You stop. Here is another sound which many people hear and which you may have heard as you walk around our city, especially if you live near a mosque. When people hear this sound, they stop what they are doing and hurry to the mosque, because it is calling them to prayer. Would you like to hear it? The *azan* is then played to the children on a cassette.

We found that by using this introduction, the *azan* was listened to with interest and respect. The words of the *azan* were then shown to the children, either written on the board, or prepared on a sheet of paper, often beautifully decorated. The children read the words interpreted in English, and the call was played again.

### The Exploration Stage

The second step of the lesson is called the exploration stage, during which the children are encouraged to explore the material. If the numen should be a story, the children now listen to it. If it is a piece of music, they hear it and are invited to pay attention to its various features. If it is a picture or a set of postcards, they look at them, ask questions about them, and are invited to answer questions which the teacher puts to them. The exploration of the material is accompanied by an invitation to draw close to the material, to enter into its world through imagination.

### The Contextualisation Stage

The third step in the lesson is called the contextualisation stage. Up until now, to return to the example of Ganesha, the children have not realised that Ganesha forms part of a religion or family of religions followed in India and elsewhere throughout the world. They do not know that he is worshipped as God and has shrines dedicated to him. Sometimes, of course, he will be recognised in his religious context immediately, during the engagement period. The first time we presented Ganesha to a group of Bangladeshi children, we were surprised when they reacted with delight, crying out "Gumpitydada! That's our God!" We learned that Gumpitydada is the name by which Ganesha is known in popular Bangladeshi religion. Usually, however, it is not until the children return for the next lesson that they encounter Ganesha as an object of worship. Now he is in his shrine, surrounded by fairy lights, with candles burning and a dish of little pieces of apple or some rose petals near him. Now the children may not approach him, but must sit on a row of chairs some distance away. They are not to remove their shoes, because they are not on holy ground. Ganesha is on holy ground, but only a child who belongs to Ganesha may approach him.

### The Reflection Stage

The fourth and final stage of the lesson is the reflection period. Now the children are invited to make applications to their lives. Various activities may follow, or the children may respond with their own creative writing. In the case of Ganesha, for example, the teacher produced various masks of the faces of animals, and the children were invited to become a certain animal, to wear the right mask, and to say why they would like to be that animal. In the case of the call to prayer, the children were asked to imagine that they could go up onto a very high tower and shout something out to the whole school or to their whole city. What would they shout out? One child said, "I would shout out 'love everyone!'"

By means of these four steps of the lesson (engagement, exploration, contextualisation and reflection), the material is presented first so as to invite the children to identify with it and second so as to distance the children from it. Intimacy is normally secured during the exploration stage. This is introduced by an entering device



(the ringing of a bell, the lighting of a candle), while the second or distancing phase is achieved through objectifying the material in the life of the religious community outside the school. Normally this is done through introducing an imaginary child who is a devotee of the material. We call this a distancing device. This normally takes place during the contextualisation stage.

These devices are reminiscent of Mary Elizabeth Moore's "techniques". "Techniques are particular practices that people use to carry out a method". Techniques can also be "put together into new patterns, giving birth to new methods". Method, on the other hand, is "a systematic approach for reaching a goal or doing enquiry into an area of study" (Moore, 1991, p. 20). Thus, in Moore's terms, the engagement stage, like the entering device, is a technique; the teaching strategy as a whole, the "Gift to the Child Approach," is a method, while the present article is an example of methodology, "the means by which we seek wisdom about method".

### Entering and Distancing Devices

Entering devices and distancing devices are based upon the belief that the child has a spiritual right to come close to religion but also a spiritual right not to come too close. In conceiving of the lesson as falling into these two stages, the coming in and the coming out again, we were influenced by Paul Ricoeur, who distinguished between the hermeneutics of the sacred and the hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1970). The hermeneutics of the sacred is based upon the phenomenology of religion, in which the religious material is invited to express itself, to utter its inner being to the beholder. The hermeneutics of the sacred assumes that one has only to remove misunderstandings and the quality of the sacred will shine forth, free from ambiguity. The hermeneutics of suspicion, however, knows that religious phenomena are often ambiguous and are subject to reinterpretation and exploitation. This is one of the reasons why the presentation of the sacred material commences with an educational appropriation of it, in which it is removed from its traditional context. Similarly, when the material is placed in its religious context, it is distanced from the pupil by means of the distancing device. For the same reasons, although the period of reflection with which the lesson closes is intended to enable the pupil to receive gifts from the material, the gifts cannot be determined beforehand or dictated either by the teacher or by the religious items.

The distinctions between the different parts of the lesson are also influenced by the writings of Alfred Schutz, who has distinguished the various finite provinces of meaning within the life-world of the person (Schutz, 1970; Grimmit, 1987). The world of everyday meaning is the fundamental one, but the areas of the imagination, of dream, of religion and so on are distinguishable. Transition from one realm to the other is accompanied by a shift in consciousness, a different perspective, as when one awakens from a dream or enters into the theatre. The entering device and the distancing device mark the points

where the pupil is invited to cross from one finite province of meaning into another. With the reflection stage, the pupil returns to the world of everyday meaning, seeking to carry with him or her the gifts from the world of religion into the ordinary experience.

### The Grid of Gifts

In the reflection stage the teachers are guided through a "grid of gifts" which is provided for every numen (Grimmitt, Grove, et al., 1991, pp. 124-125). This lists the areas in which the numen can be expected to offer gifts to children. These include gifts of theological vocabulary (every numen is taught in association with three specific religious words), gifts imparted to the child's ability to question, to empathise, to form values, to deepen identity, and to believe. The belief formation of the believing child (i.e. the child devoted to the numen and already associated with its religion) is distinguished from the belief formation of the non-believing child (i.e. the child from some other religious tradition or from no religious family background). The concept of the "gift" indicates our belief that the encounter with religious material offers a stimulus and an enrichment to the general social, personal, moral, spiritual, and educational development of children. Indeed, the object of this kind of teaching is not so much to advance the understanding of the child concerning the religious phenomena as to enable the latter to make an educational contribution toward the development of the child.

Strictly speaking, the gifts are not those of the religion but those offered by the study of religion. This is what Michael Grimmitt has in mind when he distinguishes learning *from* religion, learning *religion*, and learning *about* religion (Grimmitt, 1981; 1987, p. 141, p. 166). Learning *religion* is acquiring religious faith. Learning *about* religion is acquiring understanding of religion. Learning *from* religion means receiving contributions to one's personal, social, and spiritual development, to one's general educational development, from contact with religion, from the study of the religion.

On the one hand, we may say that not all the gifts which religions offer to people are themselves religious. Just as most peoples in the ancient and classical worlds regarded the gods as having conferred upon humanity the benefits of writing, agriculture, music, medicine, and so forth, so we may say that the gifts which religion gives are not confined to the benefits of religious faith. These are not excluded, since it would be odd to imagine that the religious child derived no special advantage from the study of his or her own religion, but the gifts which the religion offers go far beyond these. Thus, religions offer a challenge to curiosity, an opportunity to empathise more deeply, to be challenged by identities other than one's own, or to secure one's own identity more firmly.

We may describe the same thing by saying that the gifts are offered in the educational context not by the religion itself but only as mediated through the

educational process. The gifts which this study bestows are available to all genuine learners, regardless of their religious faith. Similarly, the teacher *qua* teacher, and not the teacher *qua* religious believer, is the one who enables these gifts to appear. Likewise, the child receives the gifts not as a believer necessarily, but as a learner. What is required of the religion is that it should be prepared to give itself up for the purposes of study.

### Advantages of the "Gift" Approach

Certain advantages may be claimed for this approach.

(1) While there is undoubtedly a place for the systems approach, especially in the secondary school, it is not particularly suitable for the younger child. Ideas such as "Christianity" and "Hinduism" are generalisations operating at a rather abstract level. It is difficult for children to grasp the concept of a historical stream of tradition with a more or less coherent body of doctrine and practice. Of course, the young child is introduced to the religion bit by bit, through the study of this festival, a visit to that place of worship, and so on. Those who particularly favour the systems approach, however, are fond of emphasising the integrity of each religious tradition (SCAA, 1994; Hart, 1991), and this does not seem to be consistent with the piecemeal approach which is necessary for younger children. Moreover, the systems approach seems to proceed from the presupposition of separation rather than from any recognition of the ecumenical or universal character of the human religious quest or of the dialogical relationships between the religions of the world (Hull, 1994). The gift approach is free from all these difficulties.

(2) The thematic or topical approach is sometimes criticised for offering a superficial understanding of religion, based on comparisons which may not be altogether convincing, with elements from each religion taken out of their natural and proper context. It is these aspects of thematic teaching which Colin Hart and other representatives of the Christian right wing describe as "a confusing presentation of a kaleidoscope of faiths" (Hart, 1994, p. 3) or as a mishmash (Hull, 1991a). Whether the criticisms are justified or not in the case of thematic or topical methods, it is clear that the gift approach could not be criticised in this way. The treatment of religion is by no means superficial but is a deep and sustained encounter with an aspect or an item of religious faith which is chosen for its richness and its quality of holiness. There is no comparison of one religion with another and therefore no possibility of misleading comparisons. True, the numena are taken out of their religious context, not in order to juxtapose them with any other religious elements but for the purposes of educational study, and only briefly. They are then placed back again into the context of the believing community. It is true also that only a single element or item at a time is taken, but this would be the case even when a religion was being studied more or less systematically. One can never present anything like the entire religion at once, especially to young children.

It must always be emphasised that the gift approach is a method, not a curriculum. It would thus be possible, by selecting only items from the same religion, to regard it as a method for teaching religion systematically. The method is being successfully used in a Christian context for the nurture of churchgoing children.

At the same time, the gift approach can be used to indicate the fluid or porous nature of the relationship among the religions. Two of the items in *A Gift to the Child* are specifically chosen because they are found in all three of the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These are the figure of the prophet Jonah, which is found in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Koran, and the imagery of angels. Three stories are used when angels are being presented: the story of the dream of Jacob when the angels were seen on the ladder stretching up to heaven, the story of Zechariah who saw a vision of the Archangel Gabriel telling him that he would become the father of John the Baptist, and the Angel Gabriel again, who appeared to Mohammed on the night of power to mediate the revelation of the Holy Koran. There can be no confusion because the subject of instruction is not Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, but Jonah and angels. There are various stories about Jonah; there are various appearances of angels. There is nothing confusing about it.

We may also note the concrete character of the gift approach. Both the systems approach and the topical/thematic presentation of the material require some generalising capacity. This is particularly the case when one is asking what the various religions teach on a certain subject. The gift approach is not only concrete but immediate, and it can appeal to the sense experience of children. In that respect the approach draws upon the work of Jerome Berryman in the United States (Berryman, 1991) and Maria Montessori in Italy (Standing, 1965).

(3) From the methodological point of view, the experiential methods may be criticised because an unnecessarily long introduction is presented. It is as if the teacher believes that the religious material is extraordinarily obscure, requiring extensive preparation. Religion might be shocking or unintelligible if approached too abruptly. The gift approach, on the other hand, assumes that religious material is usually interesting to children, provided it is specific and concrete and carefully selected. The result of this immediate presentation of religion is not only that a great deal of teaching time is saved, but that the religious material retains the initiative. Too often in topical work, especially in cross-curricular themes, religion is tagged on in an unconvincing manner. It is made to fit into the cross-curricular theme, and as a result the materials chosen may not be particularly representative of the religion. Dennis Bates tells of a young student teacher who was asked to create a religious education element for a junior school theme on spiders. She succeeded, but it required ingenuity (Bates, 1992, p. 101). That is not to say that the gift approach will not fit into the cross-curricular themes which are so popular in primary schools, but the concept of the numen and the practice of asking what the

gift of the numen might be discourages the use of material which is peripheral to the religion itself. The gift approach stimulates the experience of the pupil but does not presuppose it. It moves from religion to experience, not vice versa.

(4) The gift approach makes a significant contribution to the development of an educational theory of religious studies. John Sealey describes Michael Grimmitt in the early 1980s as "treading a careful path between a purely academic phenomenological approach and that of the 'religious nurturer' " and as seeking "to devise learning-situations which are sufficiently engaging at a personal level to stimulate each pupil to become involved in a form of 'interior dialogue' about themselves in which a search for 'what or who I am' is of the utmost significance" (Sealey, 1985, p. 81). Sealey asks whether such educational objectives do not go too far in the direction of confessional or nurturing religious education. He suggests that the question whether or not a pupil is going to be a useful member of society, or will discover his or her own identity successfully "is a problem for education as a whole" and does not fall within the specific domain of the aims of religious education (Sealey 1985, p. 82).

However, if the advancement of the spiritual, moral, cultural, and intellectual life of the pupil is a task for education as a whole, and if the curriculum is the major vehicle of the educational process, then it is surely appropriate that each subject should contribute to that aim, provided no subject claims to be the sole vehicle and provided that it contributes in a manner which is consistent with the educational aim of the curriculum as a whole. These conditions are met in the gift approach through the concept of learning from religious studies, that is, the gifts imparted by the study of religion. Sealey goes on to remark that "the cry of over-intellectualism in RE no doubt expresses a desire to make the subject more personally interesting to the pupil, but that is largely a problem of teaching methods and cannot seriously affect the nature of the educational enterprise" (Sealey, 1985, p. 82). Sealey's idea is that it is through their life experience that pupils are to be motivated to study religion on the assumption that the main purpose is to understand religion. However, if one turns the whole situation around, as is done in the gift approach, and begins with the impact of religious studies as stimulating the response of the child, we have a situation where the personal, social, and moral development of the child is not a mere teaching method on the way toward understanding religion but is part of the legitimate function of the subject, which it fulfils along with the other subjects of the curriculum.

Of course, understanding what religion may contribute to human development is doubtless an aspect of understanding religion, but the gift approach is explicitly instrumental whereas the phenomenological approach, insofar as it attempts to bracket out the life experience of the children, tends to perceive understanding religion as being an end in itself. This is why the problem of motivating the student becomes so acute. The gift approach assumes that the children will be motivated by the immediate interest



aroused by the religious material. Naturally, this may well be less true in the secondary school, but the gift approach is not designed for adolescents.

The contrast between learning from religion and learning from religious studies highlights the tension between the aims of the religions themselves and the aims of education. Grimmitt shrewdly observes that this tension in British religious education has been minimised "by limiting religious education to the process of conveying a religion's self-understanding to pupils in a descriptive manner" (Grimmitt, 1991, p. 78). The "religion's self-understanding" referred to is that of the religious community, and religious education has thus been understood as enabling the pupil to stand in the shoes of the religious other, that is, to see things as the religious believer sees them. This being the case, the religious communities have a legitimate interest in securing the accuracy of the material which describes them, and it becomes the function of the teacher to implant that understanding in the pupil. However, the religious communities overestimate the impact which their own self-understanding is likely to have on pupils. It is within the context of this debate that Grimmitt sees particular significance in the method of the gift to the child approach, which not only takes a more instrumental approach toward religion and a more educational approach toward the nature of religious education but insists upon the mediating function of the teacher as the interpreter. While not denying the "religious value that adherents ascribe to it" (Grimmitt, 1991, p. 82), the gift to the child approach sets the materials free to contribute to the educational development of students in ways which might not have been foreseen by the members of the religion itself.

(5) The gifts which the religious material conveys are justified through psychology or through one of the social sciences. In the Teachers' Book, each numen is supported by a rationale under the heading "Why Teach Ganesha" or Jonah as the case may be. For example, the Song of Nannak from the Guru Granth Sahib is related to the life of the pupil through the use of Abraham Maslow's theory of peak experiences. The study of the life of a young Buddhist monk is understood in the light of the impact of shopping and of commodities upon young people in a consumer society, using the Marxian idea of the commodity fetish. The children are challenged by the idea that there are people not too different from themselves who live entirely without money and who never go shopping.

(6) Finally, the gift approach has two advantages for the adult. As is natural and appropriate in the educational context, the method can be used by any trained and skilful teacher regardless of the religious faith and commitment of the teacher. However, the teacher must be a mature person who has had the experience of grappling with the religious imagery of his or her own infancy, those conveyed in the culture, and those characteristic of the religions of the world. It is not required that the teacher should believe in God. It is required that the teacher should have confronted the question of God both emotionally and intellectually and should have achieved a certain maturity

in relationship to the concept and the image of God. Part of the reason for this lies in the importance of theological conversation in the use of the method. The teacher must be able to converse freely, spontaneously, and with humour on religious subjects and enter into educational conversation with children (Hull, 1991b). This not only requires a detailed religious and theological knowledge of the numen but involves standing under the power of the numen and being open to its sacred influence. The hermeneutics of suspicion is essential in the process, but it can commence only when the hermeneutics of the sacred has done its work. The method can be used successfully only by teachers who are aware of the power of the sacred, but who are also capable of being suspicious of it. The believer who is ideologically enclosed (Hull, 1991c) cannot cope with this method, nor can the unbeliever who is enclosed within unbelief.

The result is that in this method the training of the teacher is often similar to a process of adult faith development. Those who begin by trying to learn how to teach angels find their own lives brushed by angels' wings. In other words, you cannot help children to be sensitive to the values of religions unless you yourself share that sensitivity and experience at some time the power of those values. The experience of Julie Grove and Louise Spencer in conducting teacher training programs on the use of the method confirms the impact which it has on the teachers not only as professionals but as adults who need to receive their own developmental gifts (Tall & Grove, 1993).

It is important to conclude by reminding ourselves once again that the method is indeed a method and not a curriculum. It does not even claim to be the only method appropriate for use in the religious education classroom. As has been said above, the systems approach remains indispensable at least in the secondary school, and all of the other methods mentioned have their contribution to make. The gift to the child approach is offered as a contribution to the pedagogical repertoire of the religious education teacher.

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