A Critically Realistic Pedagogy for Teaching the Abrahamic Religions

This paper presents the basic principles of a pedagogy for teaching the Abrahamic religions in the light of the philosophies of critical realism and critical religious education.

Critical Realism

Though critical realism is closely associated with the philosophy of Roy Bhaskar (Collier, 1994), it has roots in natural science and Christian theology. Albert Einstein’s observation that ‘belief in an external world independent of the perceiving subject is the basis of all natural science’ constitutes a concise summary of critical realism (Torrance, 1986, p.1). In the field of theology, Thomas Torrance’s reading of Karl Barth paved the way for two major theological projects that adopt a critically realistic perspective: Alister McGrath’s Scientific Theology and Tom Wright’s Christian Origins and the Question of God (Torrance, 1962; McGrath, 2001–03; Wright 1992– ).

Bhaskar’s recent engagement with spiritual and theological questions has sparked a lively debate between critically realistic philosophers and theologians (Archer et al., 2004).

Critical realism is grounded in three core principles.

Ontological realism asserts that reality – the sum total of all that actually ‘is’ – exists independently of our ability to perceive it: when a tree falls in a forest it does so even if nobody actually sees it falling; similarly, if God exists he would continue to do so even if every living human being were an atheist. Given our present experience of the world, it is reasonable to suppose that reality is made up of organic and inorganic matter, consciousness in animals with central nervous systems, the products of human culture, together with – though this is disputed by a small but significant minority – God or some other form of transcendent reality.

Epistemic relativity recognises that our knowledge of reality is rooted in specific socio-cultural contexts, restricted by our limited experiences and imperfect intellects, and as such is partial, contingent and often simply wrong. Only God can discern the totally of all that is and fully understand its nature, meaning and purpose. However, this does not mean we must embrace a post-modern vision of relativism and radical skepticism. It is clear that we do possess relatively secure knowledge of certain aspects of reality. If this were not the case, we would not be able to perform open-heart surgery, walk on the moon, appreciate the beauty of the night sky or condemn genocide as evil.

Judgemental rationality claims we can make informed judgements between competing truth claims, albeit judgements that are always provisional and open to counter-arguments. Since some ways of understanding the world are clearly better than others – the world is not flat, and The Da Vinci Code is a work of fiction rather than historical theology (Brown, 2004; cf. Wright, 2005) – it makes sense to strive to understand the way the world actually is. Such judgements are unavoidable. In every aspect of our lives we begin with what we already know (or think we know) and, provided we are wise, seek deeper and more truthful understanding.

Critical realists recognise that reality is complex, stratified and value-laden: complex, because we can penetrate beyond external appearances and discern underlying structures (water is made up of hydrogen and oxygen); stratified, because the mathematician, physicist, biologist, chemist, psychologist, sociologist, historian, poet, painter, philosopher and theologian can all reveal different aspects of the same person in distinctive but mutually compatible ways; value-laden, because our encounter with the world forces us to respond to it aesthetically, morally and spiritually. Since we are embodied in reality, our knowledge is inevitably personal. We ask questions not about the world-out-there, but about our relationship with the world-we-indwell.

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Critical Religious Education

The philosophy of critical religious education is an ongoing project based at King’s College London that draws inspiration from both the philosophical and theological traditions of critical realism (Wright, 2004, 2007). It is not intended as a comprehensive model of religious education designed to replace other ‘rival’ models, but rather as an interpretative tool for analysing, illuminating and thereby enhancing current theory and practice.

It seeks to be ‘critical’ in three ways: by focusing on the most significant/critical aspects of religion at the expense of lesser peripheral issues; by recognising that religions are deeply controversial and as such raise vital/critical questions about ourselves and our place in the ultimate order-of-things; by affirming the possibility of making informed/critical judgements between conflicting religious and secular worldviews.

The principle of ontological realism leads critical religious education to argue that the most significant/critical aspect of the Abrahamic traditions are constituted by their substantial ontological truth claims: that God selected Israel as his chosen race; that Jesus Christ was the incarnation of God; that God revealed his will for humanity in the Qur’an. In sharp contrast, contemporary religious education tends to represent the Abrahamic traditions as socio-cultural phenomena in a manner designed to enhance religious tolerance. Questions of the truth-or-otherwise of the distinctive Jewish, Christian and Islamic accounts of ultimate reality tend to be either simply ignored, cast into the crucible of a theological universalism in which all religions are considered equally valid, or deflected into abstract philosophical investigations dislocated from concrete theological beliefs and practices.

The principle of epistemic relativism draws attention to the fact that we are faced with a range of mutually contradictory religious and secular accounts of ultimate reality. If atheists are right, than all three Abrahamic traditions must be wrong. If Islam is true, then Christianity must be false, since Jesus of Nazareth cannot be simultaneously God incarnate and a prophet of Allah. Such contradictions are not merely of academic interest, since they raise vital/critical questions about the meaning and purpose of life and our place in the ultimate order-of-things.

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Put simply, the beliefs that we live by matter profoundly. If, for example, atheism is true and reality is ultimately no more a product of causal processes described by the natural sciences, then a life of Christian discipleship, grounded in belief in a creator God whose gracious unconditional love led to his incarnation as a human being, is utterly pointless.

The principle of judgemental rationality suggests that, we can and ought to be discerning in our beliefs, subjecting them to critical examination and making informed/critical judgements between conflicting religious and secular viewpoints. The distinction between objective verifiable knowledge and subjective unverifiable belief suggests that religious commitment requires a blind leap of faith and presents atheism as a default position that is entirely rational and does not require justification. However, this distinction cannot hold: there is no such thing as pure objective knowledge, and we all – atheists and religious adherents alike – cannot avoid subscribing to some forms of belief system. The model for all is not that of rational understanding seeking faith, but of a range of secular and religious faith commitments seeking deeper understanding. Our faith commitments need not be arbitrary. It is possible to make wise and discerning decisions regarding them.

Pedagogy: From Constructivism to Realism

Pressure on teachers to ‘perform’ in lessons often leads them to focus on their teaching methods rather than on their students’ learning. Critical religious education seeks to reverse this polarity. Students’ learning constitutes the most critical aspect of classroom interaction, and even the most imaginative and innovative teaching methods are of no consequence if effective learning does not actually take place. For example, it is possible to learn the same thing through a range of different teaching techniques, and these can be adapted to meet the needs and abilities of pupils as well as individual teachers’ preferred teaching styles and methods. However, such teaching methods must be judged by their ability to bring about learning by enabling students to deepen their understanding of the relevant object of knowledge.

Critical religious education seeks to resist the reduction of professional teachers to classroom technicians by insisting that classroom practice must be informed by a clear theoretical framework.

Good teachers will not merely utilize a range of familiar teaching techniques because they are ‘tried and tested’ and apparently ‘work’ in the classroom, rather, they will employ specific techniques in the light of their theoretical understanding of how such techniques will serve to enhance pupils’ learning. If teachers are to develop as life-long reflective practitioners it is vital that any discussion of pedagogy addresses theoretical issues alongside practical ones.

One of the most influential pedagogic theories in contemporary religious education is that of ‘constructivism’. According to this theory, pupils learn by assimilating information about religion into their own pre-given conceptual frameworks. By engaging empathetically with religious believers, pupils will be able, it is claimed, to pour new knowledge into the crucible of their own experiences, moulding and shaping it into meaningful patterns that make sense to them. This theory resonates with the post-modern belief that since there is no reality beyond our immediate experiences for us to discover and explore we are free to construct our own realities and worldviews in the light of our own personal desires and preferences. What really matters, according to this view, is not whether a religious tradition offers a truthful account of ultimate reality, but whether the representation of that tradition is relevant to pupils.

Critical religious education rejects constructivism in favour of a ‘realistic’ pedagogy of learning. According to this theory, pupils learn by penetrating beneath the surface appearance of religions in a manner:

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that opens up the possibility of their pre-given conceptual frameworks being transformed by their encounter with contrasting religious and secular truth claims. By exploring the worldviews and belief systems of religious adherents they will be able to discern critical differences between them and their own worldviews and beliefs and thereby explore questions about the ultimate nature of reality in an informed and intelligent manner. This theory resonates with critical realism’s claim that reality cannot be reduced to our limited experiences of reality, and that to learn about the world requires us to open our minds to new horizons of meaning and the possibility of encountering truths of which we were previously unaware. We learn not by constructing our own personal realities, but by discovering more about reality itself.

**Ontological Realism: Religious and Secular Worldviews**

Critical religious education seeks to focus on the most significant/critical aspects of religion at the expense of more peripheral issues. In the light of the principle of ontological realism it identifies the ontological truth claims of different religious and secular worldviews – their contrasting and conflicting accounts of our place in the ultimate order-of-things – as having greater critical significance than more peripheral socio-cultural features. Thus, for example, understanding how and why Muslims seek to submit to the will of Allah is more important to this approach than being able to describe the observable sequence of actions adopted by Muslims as they pray.

An extended illustration of the principles evoked by this theory now follows.

If pupils are to achieve a deeper understanding of the weather, their learning cannot be reduced to a process of merely describing their immediate experience of a particular weather system, nor can it be limited to a process of describing alternative weather systems beyond their immediate experience. A deeper understanding of the weather requires pupils to understand the various causal mechanisms – the impact of air pressure and temperature variation, the angle of the sun on the earth’s surface, the gravitational pull of the moon, the consequences of our own all-too-human interactions with the environment etc. – that generate and sustain particular weather systems.

Thus, a phenomenological description of different weather systems needs to give way to theoretical explanations of how and why such systems are produced.

By analogy, if pupils are to achieve an informed understanding of religions and their secular counterparts then their learning cannot be reduced to a process of merely describing their immediate experiences of a particular belief system; nor can it be limited to a process of describing alternative worldviews that they do not have immediate first-hand access to. Rather, an in-depth understanding of religion requires pupils to understand the nature, causes, grounds and justifications of specific belief systems. Phenomenological description, that is to say, needs to give way to philosophical and theological engagement with different explanations of the ultimate order-of-things.

Such explanations require us to pay attention to the propositional truth claims of different religious traditions (e.g. Christian beliefs about the Trinity and incarnation, Muslim beliefs about the Qur’an as a vehicle of divine revelation). However, we need to recognize that such propositions are normally presented in metaphorical language that seeks to account for objects of knowledge not immediately open to empirical observation. Just as we cannot taste the hydrogen and oxygen in water, so most of us have no direct sensual experience of God.

Further, such propositional metaphors are not free-standing: they combine to form narratives and stories that account for God’s dealings with his creation, and these in turn form part of a holistic and comprehensive worldview. Such worldviews cannot be reduced to mere ‘theory’. ‘Speech act theory’ shows us that to tell a story is to participate in it in some way. Thus, a Christian attending Holy Communion will participate in the story enacted in the sharing of bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, and locate their own personal story within the Christian meta-narrative; at the same time, an atheist attending the same service will participate ‘negatively’ by making sense of what is going on in the light of their alternative account of ultimate reality.

The implications of this focus on ontological issues for teaching in the classroom are profound. To understand the three great Abrahamic faiths requires us to look beyond phenomenological appearances and discern the underlying meta-narratives that support and sustain them.

As revealed religions ‘of the book’, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are each grounded in their respective sacred scriptures, and it is these that contain the primary evidence of their contrasting worldviews. It follows that deep scriptural reading and discernment is more critical to the development of religious literacy than relatively superficial descriptions of socio-cultural phenomena, and that such scriptural reading needs to be oriented towards a holistic grasp of the text’s overarching meta-narrative.

**Epistemic Relativity: Conflicting Worldviews**

Critical religious education draws on the principle of epistemic relativism to affirm that religious and secular truth claims are deeply controversial and as such raise vital/critical questions about ourselves and our place in the ultimate order-of-things.

It is important to recognize the fact that a commitment to the importance of questions of truth and truthful living can go hand-in-hand with an acknowledgement that answers to such questions are fundamentally contested.

All too often in contemporary religious education the recognition of the contested nature of religious and secular truth claims generates a premature and uncritical assumption that there is no path beyond the affirmation of a thoroughgoing relativism. Either questions of truth are bracketed out as irrelevant or unanswerable, or else an ideology of theological universalism that asserts the equal truth of all religious traditions is imposed.

Such a universalism is contrary to the self-understanding of all three Abrahamic faiths, as well as to the self-understanding of atheists. Doug Porpora, a leading critically realistic sociologist, has shown that though many

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adult Americans are able to give coherent accounts of their lives in their personal and social ‘spaces’, few are able to give a similarly coherent account of their lives in relationship to questions of ultimate meaning and truth (Porpora, 2001).

His study implies that religious illiteracy is closely linked to a failure to engage with conflicting accounts of our place in the ultimate order-of-things, a failure closely linked with underlying relativistic assumptions that since such questions are unanswerable they are also irrelevant to our spiritual flourishing.

Critical religious education seeks to challenge such relativism. The fact of conflicting truth claims demands a deep engagement with them, not a superficial marginalisation. One does not have to be a relativist to take epistemic relativism seriously. The contested nature of accounts of ultimate reality need not draw the conclusion that all such accounts are equally valid. On the contrary, it ought to lead us to attempt to evaluate the truth, or otherwise, of such accounts.

The pedagogic implication of this focus on the contested nature of accounts of our place in the ultimate order-of-things is that teachers need to present pupils with a range of such accounts and draw attention to their controversial nature.

**Judgemental Rationality: Spiritual Discernment**

Critical religious education draws on the principle of judgemental rationality to address the crucial importance of empowering pupils to make informed critical judgements between conflicting religious and secular accounts of ultimate reality.

This involves a significant step beyond prevailing practice in religious education, which tends to be content to address the twin liberal principles of freedom of belief and tolerance of the beliefs of others.

Whilst not wishing to dispute the value of these principles, critical religious educators argue that they do not go far enough. To cultivate indiscriminate freedom is to allow pupils to hold beliefs that may be irrational, immoral and spiritually superficial. Similarly, to cultivate indiscriminate tolerance is to ignore the fact that there are many aspects of religious traditions that are not worthy of tolerance – e.g. racist and sexist attitudes and religiously ‘inspired’ violence. It follows that we need to teach pupils to make informed judgements about the way in which they exercise their freedom and make moral and spiritual judgements. Genuine respect for persons requires us to engage with their belief systems and entertain the possibility that they may actually be true. Failure to do so by burying difference in a superficial regime of tolerance sends a clear signal that we do not consider another person’s beliefs worthy of critical engagement.

Critical judgement is unavoidable. All of us, whether explicitly or implicitly, have already made critical judgements between conflicting worldviews in confirming or adopting those belief systems through which we currently organise or lives.

Critical judgement is not to be misread as a means of selecting a religious or secular ‘product’ in the multi-faith shopping mall. We have already made our choices, and most of us will continue to hold fast to these choices for the rest of our lives – though this is not to rule out the possibility of conversion, in which case we abandon one choice in favour of a more spiritually attractive and/or intellectually powerful alternative. Critical religious education is not so much concerned with the making of choices as with the cultivation of deeper discernment and understanding of the choices we have already made, via a process in which we learn to discern our faith commitments in deeper and more profound ways by comparing and contrasting them with the faith commitments of others.

The process of making informed critical judgements cannot be reduced to a narrow rationalism. Philosophical arguments on the existence of God may illuminate and clarify our beliefs, but few of us choose to live our lives on the basis of the outcome of such debates. Rather, critical judgements in the field of religious and secular accounts of ultimate reality are more akin to those we make in the fields of the arts and morality. Though we may judge Mozart to be a great composer and condemn the perpetrators of the Holocaust with a relatively high level of confidence, we are likely to struggle to explain the precise reasoning behind our judgement. Our spiritual discernment, like our artistic and moral discernment, is often more tacit and intuitive than explicit and logical. We make judgements in the light of our holistic experience of life grounded in our capacity to penetrate the heart of an issue rather than through the mechanical application of a set of rationalistic criteria. Such intuitive judgements are part and parcel of our everyday lives. Our ability to judge the character of another person, to look beyond surface appearances and penetrate into the depth of their being, is grounded in our broader life experience in which we learn to understand ourselves and those we relate to increasingly complex ways.

The fact that we struggle to explain exactly why we distrust the honesty of another person does not mean that our judgement is entirely arbitrary. In order to make discerning judgements we need access to as much evidence as possible, and need to be able to interpret that evidence in deep and nuanced ways. Here there are no quick-fix solutions or absolute certainties.
The task of spiritual discernment is similar to that faced by a jury weighing up contested interpretations of the available evidence in a court of law. A religiously literate person is one who is able to make informed judgements between conflicting accounts of ultimate reality and discern the implications of such accounts for the way in which they conduct their own spiritual lives. The core task of critical religious education is to cultivate religiously literate pupils, and hence, in the longer term, a religiously literate society.

The pedagogic implication is that the cultivation of religious literacy should be predicated on the empowering of pupils to make informed judgements about their own worldviews in the light of the worldviews of others.

Conclusion
There are no short-cuts in successful teaching and learning in religious education. The range of possible teaching methods available for the teaching the Abrahamic faiths needs to be grounded in a clear theoretical framework. Critical religious education suggests that a realistic pedagogic framework should be informed by three core principles:

a) an exploration of the meta-narratives of Judaism, Christianity and Islam grounded in a deep reading of their respective scriptures;
b) a comparison of these three meta-narratives both with one another and with alternative religious and secular accounts of ultimate reality;
c) the cultivation of pupils’ abilities to make informed judgements between conflicting worldviews, including their own belief systems.

Andrew Wright
Professor of Religious and Theological Education
King’s College, London

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