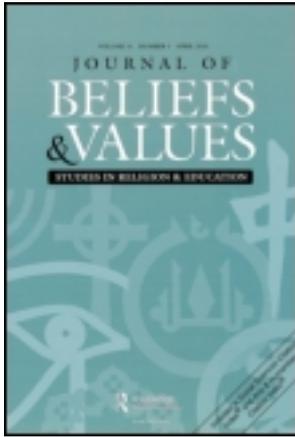


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### Too many competing imperatives? Does RE need to rediscover its identity?

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## **Too many competing imperatives? Does RE need to rediscover its identity?**

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The intention of this paper is to make a contribution to religious education (RE)'s constant search for a rigorous curriculum identity. The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)/Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) project 'Does RE work?' has recently reported its findings, in which it concludes that RE suffers from too many competing expectations. A major reason for this is that, according to the report, policymakers have 'freighted it with too many competing imperatives'. Such imperatives range from religious literacy, through multicultural awareness, philosophical understanding, moral development and understanding heritage to sex and relationship education. In all, the project lists 13 such imperatives! It is little wonder then that the project echoes OfSTED's recent finding that teachers were under-confident and unsure as to the aims and purposes of the subject. The AHRC/ESRC project's findings also reflect a theoretical debate in RE that has been going on for some time. This debate might be termed 'religious education and disciplinary identity'. So, should RE be regarded as a discipline in its own right, rather like history is regarded as a discipline, or is RE better understood as employing a number of disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, psychology in its pursuit? This question of the subject's identity did not simply arise out a move from a 'confessional' Christian identity to a multi-faith identity in the 1970s but was a live issue well before then. This paper takes the view that RE needs to prioritise its aims for the subject and place the aim of pupils' spiritual and moral development at the forefront of its concerns. In so doing religious educators need to continue the debate about the representation of religion in RE.

**Keywords:** religious education; aims; content; representing religion

### **Introduction**

What one might call the self-understanding of religious education (RE) in UK schools has never been without its controversies. However, since the turn of the millennium what has dominated research in RE both nationally and internationally has been discourse about the nature and purpose of the subject (Freathy 2007). On reflection, this is not surprising because in an overcrowded school curriculum a subject that does not know what it is and what distinctive contribution it can make is constantly in danger of being marginalised. As Doble (2010, 175) has pointed out: 'a consensual model for RE in public space is essential, and its practitioners need constantly to clarify what they are about'.

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Recently, OfSTED (2010) has reported that in many cases teachers are uncertain about the ‘core purposes’ of RE. They note that while this may provide the basis for stimulating debate within the subject community, it does not help teachers to become effective in the classroom. Indeed ‘teachers were often working with a variety of different perspectives about the basic purposes of the subject’ (OfSTED 2010, 42).

Arguably one of the most interesting aspects of the briefing paper that accompanied the ‘launch of findings’ conference of the major Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)/Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded project ‘Does RE work?’ is the light it throws on why such lack of clarity has come about. The project claims that unlike curriculum subjects such as history, geography or maths, which, ‘are heuristic devices for interpreting and interrogating the world’, religion, ‘represents a way of standing in the world’. In other words, religion is, like education, itself, a social practice. According to the project, RE carries an ‘explicit burden’ to address many of the ‘normative concerns, social expectations, economic considerations and cultural anxieties inherent in education as part of its charge to shape young people’s spiritual, moral and social attitudes and behaviours’ (Conroy 2011, 2), not so much a subject to be studied as a unique way of understanding the world.

Consequently, politicians and policymakers have burdened RE with a list of expectations, not all equally shared or understood, the result of which is that the subject has become ‘freighted with too many expectations’ (Conroy 2011, 5–6). The project lists 13 such expectations ranging from religious literacy to sex and relationship education. It is because of this impossible burden that RE ‘struggles to enjoy a well-defined academic space in schools’ (Conroy 2011, 6).

While this is undoubtedly true, I want to explore the possibility of arguing a case for RE as a subject discipline in its own right and as a way of interpreting the world. The debate about the possibility of regarding RE as a discipline in its own right, rather like history is regarded as a discipline, as opposed to it being understood as employing a number of disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, psychology in its pursuit, has recently been reignited (Baumfield 2005; Francis 2011). Such a debate has potentially significant consequences for the subject’s self-understanding.

Baumfield (2005, 3) puts the issue succinctly:

...the status of religious education as the most controversial subject in the school curriculum, at least in the UK, remains unchallenged... The contested nature of religious education derives from three aspects: different perceptions of its aim and purpose; the fact that it is a compulsory subject in a secular curriculum; lack of agreement as to the domain of the subject.

While the fact that RE is a compulsory subject in a secular curriculum underpins the way I present the argument, I will concentrate on a discussion about RE’s aims and the way religion is represented in RE.

### **The aims of RE: RE and competing expectations**

If one examines the aims of RE in post-1988 Agreed Syllabuses as well as ‘official’ documents such as the 1994 School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) Model Syllabuses and the 2004 Non-Statutory National Framework for Religious Education (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 2004), it is clearly evident that

there has been a broad agreement as to the aims of the intended curriculum for RE.<sup>1</sup> Everington (2000, 184–5) lists them as:

- Acquiring and developing knowledge and understanding of Christianity and the other principal religions represented in Great Britain;
- Developing the ability to make reasoned and informed judgements about religious and moral issues;
- Enhancing pupils' spiritual, moral, cultural and social development by: developing awareness of the fundamental questions of life raised by human experiences, responding to such questions with reference to the teachings and practices of religions to their own understanding and experience; reflecting on their own beliefs, values and experiences in the light of their study;
- Developing a positive attitude towards other people, respecting their right to hold different beliefs from their own and towards living in a society of diverse religions.

However, there is a difference between stating the aims for a subject and articulating the subject's purpose, and an examination of the aforementioned aims forces one to conclude that they represent three distinct views of the purpose of RE. Everington (2000, 185–6) states these as:

- The purpose of RE is to enable pupils to gain knowledge and understanding of religion(s).
- The purpose of RE is to promote understanding of and respect for people whose cultures and beliefs are different from one's own and to promote a positive attitude towards living in a plural society.
- The purpose of RE is to promote the personal, moral and spiritual development of pupils.

When examining these three 'purposes' of the subject the immediate question that springs to mind is, does this list represent three distinct purposes of one subject called RE? If so, how are these related to each other in an overall conception of the nature and purpose of the subject? An alternative question is, does this list represent three different subjects; the first being an academic study of religious traditions, a school-based version of the academic, multi-disciplinary subject called Religious Studies; the second a form of citizenship education with an overall aim of social cohesion; the third a form of personal, moral and spiritual education?

These are important questions because without answers to them it is difficult to see how it is possible to come to any agreement as to the 'purpose, identity and direction of the subject' (Everington 2000, 183). Furthermore, neither is it possible to explore adequately how the study of religion might be understood if there is such a lack of clarity about the essential nature of the RE.

Of course a significant factor in all this, as Conroy (2011) points out, is the fact that the development of RE has often been subject to political influence. This is too big a subject to cover adequately here but it is interesting to mention at this point that because of wider political influences, one of the aforementioned purposes of the subject has been in vogue at different times. For example, arising out of Smart's (1968) 'phenomenological' approach to RE, the Swann Report (Her Majesty's Stationery Office 1985, 465) recommended the phenomenological approach as being the best vehicle for 'preparing *all* pupils for life in a pluralist society' (emphasis in

original). This echoes the second purpose mentioned previously, and of course places the subject firmly in the realm of social practice. However, following on from the 1988 Education Reform Act, the religious clauses of which were surrounded by a vehement debate about the place of Christianity in RE and the requirement from RE to have more of a religious aim, the 1990s saw the focus shift to the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils. Indeed, this became a major focus of the first OfSTED inspection framework for inspecting schools.

It is the contention of this paper that in order to clarify a workable aim for RE, the three purposes outlined earlier require prioritising. It is unrealistic, for example, to ignore the potential for RE to contribute to social cohesion as it is unrealistic to ignore the importance of the subject for pupils' spiritual and moral development. However, if we are to articulate a workable aim then it requires religious educators to prioritise one of these purposes, and it is the one concerned with pupils' spiritual and moral development that affords most opportunity to conceptualise a distinctive nature for their subject. So in this context I take the view that pupils' spiritual and moral development is the main purpose of RE. It is then possible to conceive of the aforementioned three purposes not necessarily as three different subjects but as complementary aims in the following way:

- The purpose of RE is to promote the personal, moral and spiritual development of pupils (main aim);
- The purpose of RE is to enable pupils to gain knowledge and understanding of religion(s) (instrumental aim);
- The purpose of RE is to promote understanding of and respect for people whose cultures and beliefs are different from one's own and to promote a positive attitude towards living in a plural society (consequential aim).

Of course, one cannot guarantee that the first two aims will result in the third outcome but it is difficult to see how understanding and respect can be the main aim for the subject. One cannot make people understand and respect others any more than one can make them happy. Respect, understanding and, indeed, happiness are the possible consequences of something else.

Having made a case for prioritising the aims that RE has accumulated over the years, the question that now requires addressing is how should the study of religion be understood in a way that best enables these aims to be achieved? The first thing that needs re-emphasising is that, as can be seen above, the study of religion is instrumental in this approach. It is instrumental to the requirement to contribute to pupils' spiritual and moral development with the possibility that this may contribute to a greater understanding, not only of their own beliefs and values, but to others' beliefs and values, and hence make a contribution to social cohesion. But what understanding of religion can contribute most effectively to this, in a way that enables RE to be seen as a distinctive contribution that it is not, for example, just a form of citizenship or social education? The first thing that needs to be said is that the way that religion is represented in RE has a long contested history.

### **The representation of religion in RE: historical perspectives**

Even prior to the 1870 Education Act the place of Christian teaching in schools had been controversial as witnessed in a dispute between Dr Andrew Bell, an Anglican, and Joseph Lancaster, a Quaker. Bell favoured the kind of teaching that took place

in the church schools which was catechistic, while Lancaster favoured non-sectarian teaching of what he called ‘general Christian principles and them only’ (Teece 2010a, 42). Such impartiality was reinforced in the 1870 Act through the Cowper-Temple Clause. This clause essentially governed how the teaching of Christianity was to be understood during the decades leading up to the 1944 Education Act.

However, Copley (1998) points out that between the years 1934 and 1939 there were various articles in the journal *Religion in Education Quarterly* about the philosophy and nature of RE. One issue, among others, that was discussed at the time concerned the relationship between religion, or the study of religion, and education. Copley identifies clearly how many articles on Bible teaching during those years addressed the issue of the need for religion; in most cases this meant the Bible or ‘the scriptures’, to be ‘concerned with religion rather than the history of religion’. In other words there was, as now, a major concern about RE having a distinctive character that reflected the essential nature of its subject matter (Smart 1968). In the 1930s, this largely amounted to warnings about the danger of neglecting theology (Copley 1998, 83). This was because, arguably, theology was seen as what might be referred to as the ‘parent subject’.<sup>2</sup>

The thorny question of how to address the subject matter of RE was an ongoing issue throughout what Hull (1982) refers to as the Christian nurture years (xiii) and the belief that state sponsored RE should ‘not influence the minds of children on disputed questions of religion’ (xii) was reinforced in the 1944 Education Act. Copley (2005, 149) tends to think that the nervousness about teaching religion stems from a characteristically British embarrassment about the subject. Nevertheless, it is clearly evident that the subject, whether it is labelled ‘religious education’, ‘religious studies’, ‘religious instruction’ or even ‘religious knowledge’, has always had at its core an issue with the question of what it is to teach religion. This could be seen to make RE something of an anomaly in the curriculum. This anomaly has been pointed out by a number of commentators, for example Newbigin (1977), Moran (1989, 98–107) and Copley (2005, 149). Moran is particularly illuminating here when he states:

As professor in a university, I do teach, among other things, religious education, that is I teach teachers about the teaching of religion. In the U.K. teaching religion is sometimes used interchangeably with teaching religious education. Writers seem unaware of the logical problem with that and unaware of what a strange use of language it is to make religious education the object of the act of teaching. Does one teach the child education? (Moran 1989, 100)

If the direct teaching of religion was seen to be an issue prior to the 1944 Education Act, then it became an even more contentious issue when in the late 1960s and early 1970s the teaching of world religions was introduced into RE syllabuses. This was an intensely creative period in which religious educators were forced to reconceptualise their subject to such an extent that Hull (1982, xiv) believed led to the creation of a new subject.

This is not the place to enter into an historical survey of the development of British RE with its peaks and troughs and contestation (Parker and Freathy 2011; Freathy and Parker 2010). This has been more than adequately achieved by a number of significant commentators who have to a greater or lesser extent traced the origins of, and reasons for, this reconceptualisation. For example, most comprehensively Copley (2008); more contemporaneously of the time, Hull (1982); with

regard to the need to teach about the major religions of the world, Bates (1994, 1996) and with a specific regard for pedagogy, Grimmitt (2000).

Rather, at this point in the present article it is instructive to look back at a number of questions posed firstly by the Schools Council's (1971) Working Paper 36 and then compare them with questions listed by Copley (2008). In 1971 the authors of the Schools Council Working Paper, referring to 'rapid social and educational changes in recent years', listed six questions prompted by the demands of the social and educational context in which schools found themselves at that time:

- What are the educational reasons for including any subject in the curriculum?
- Should religion have a place? If so, what place?
- If the term 'religious education' is used, what exactly is meant, and what is not meant by it?
- How far should religion be taught or studied from any one religious standpoint?
- Is there a unique contribution made by RE that is not made, for example, by social education or moral education?
- What is the difference between the task of the school in RE and that of the church, home, synagogue, or mosque?

It is interesting to compare these questions with questions posed by Copley (2008) in the second edition of his historical survey of RE in England and Wales. He proposes that the questions for RE in the second decade of the twenty-first century are about:

...what its subject matter will be, what pedagogy will be appropriate and the precise form of its presence in the curriculum. Should RE relate to the humanities, notably history and geography? To personal and social education? Is citizenship as a subject the natural friend or foe of RE? Should RE relate more closely to the creative arts, and subjects that seek to nurture the imagination? Or is RE a loner, offering something unique and distinctive? (Copley 2008, xii)

What is remarkable about these sets of questions is how similar they are despite nearly 40 years of curriculum development and theoretical discussion in the RE literature. If one were to try and characterise each publication's overriding concern it might be articulated in the question, 'what makes RE distinctive as a curriculum subject?'

### **Representing religion in RE: criticisms of the 'establishment' view**

Copley (2008, 207) has pointed out that in the 40 years following the Schools Council's (1971) Working Paper 36, there has been almost no dialogue between professional religious educators and professional theologians in the UK. This has, according to Copley (2007, 2008) impoverished both communities: 'In its efforts to be perceived as an essentially educational exercise and not a religious one, RE lost touch with the changes and insights it might have gained from theology'. Over the same period a number of religious educators have called for a rapprochement between the confessional and phenomenological models reflecting the inadvisability of marginalising theology from RE; see, for example, Slee (1989) and Watson (1992). Furthermore, Cooling (1996) insists that any view of the nature and purpose of RE involves a theological position.

Nevertheless, Copley (2008, 194) states that by the year 2000 such developments in RE had led to an ‘establishment view of RE’. In many ways it is the perceived theological position of what Wright (1993) referred to as ‘modern RE’ that has been the focus of an ongoing critical debate firstly in the political debates surrounding the Education Reform Act 1988 (Burn and Hart 1988; Hansard 1992; Copley 2008, 128–152) and more recently and systematically by religious educators (Erricker 2006; Jackson 1997; Wright 1993, 1997, 1998, 2004; Barnes 2000, 2001, 2007a, 2007b, 2009; and Barnes and Wright 2006). The most significant aspect of these criticisms is the claim, particularly forcefully expressed by Barnes (2007a, 25–27), that RE based on the phenomenological approach misrepresents the nature of religion.

Essentially, criticisms of the phenomenological approach to RE have focused on two major areas of concern. The first, as expressed by Barnes (2000, 2001, 2007a, 2009), concerns the phenomenological understanding of the nature of religion with its view of universal essences that forms, according to its critics a type of implicit confessionalism and a reductionist account of religious truth and authenticity. The second is the application of ‘stereotypical simplified versions of his [Smart’s] six dimensional model of religion’ which ‘were also labelled phenomenological’ (Alberts 2007, 91). As Alberts (2007, 90) points out, these criticisms can only be applied ‘partially – if at all’ to Smart’s original intentions for the subject and ‘Smart uses the word “phenomenological” in a particular way’. Doble (2010, 175) points out that Smart deployed a pragmatic rather than philosophical phenomenology and, furthermore: ‘would not recognise Barnes’s account’. Lovat (2001) even goes as far as saying, in response to Barnes, that phenomenologists such as Husserl, upon whom many of the critics of phenomenological RE lay the blame for its inappropriate understanding of religion, were not overly concerned with essences and that Husserl’s thesis was chiefly a methodological concern. Certainly Smart does not presuppose universal essences (Smart 1975; Jackson 1997; Alberts 2007, 91).

### **Representing religion in RE: the adoption of a new ‘establishment’ or orthodoxy**

While contributions to the discourse by those such as Barnes and Wright have certainly invigorated philosophical debates about RE and have rightly pointed out some genuinely problematical issues, there is now a sense in which there has developed a new orthodoxy. Such orthodoxy insists that the only correct way to understand and interpret religion is in a traditionally conservative, largely Christian, rationalistic way that understands religious commitment as an exclusivist adherence to contested propositional belief. This not only makes unwarranted assumptions about the nature of the experience of many adherents of religions, who do not take such a view, but potentially narrows the possibilities for RE in that it ‘distorts religion into a matter of true v. false knowledge’ and furthermore claims ‘about religions being primarily about truth claims is not an understanding of religion that would find ready acceptance amongst many theorists of religion’ (Strhan 2010, 33). Furthermore, such an approach potentially ‘indoctrinates students into a distorted understanding of what it is to be religious’ and ‘tends to present religion in too simplistic terms as assent to certain religious propositions’ (Strhan 2010, 31).

If Wright (2007, 18) is correct – and there are many who agree with him (Copley 2008, 211–212) that RE should be concerned with the pursuit of truth and a RE concerned with truth ‘must also address the challenge of how to live life truthfully, that is to say in harmony with ultimate reality’ (Wright 2007, 14), and recogn-

ising that there are many contested and contradictory views of the nature of ultimate reality, then to limit RE to an engagement with ‘truth claims’ is to narrow unnecessarily the conception of religion and, possibly, to distort individual religions. Smart (1968) warned against this narrowing by insisting that RE will be unbalanced if the historical and parahistorical dimensions do not inform each other. Furthermore, Doble (2010), in offering a critique of Barnes, has challenged him to answer the following questions: how are truth claims to be selected?; how are they to be understood?; in what context are they to be studied?; how are pupils expected to evaluate them? Indeed as Doble (2010, 176) points out, the:

...relatively modern term ‘religion’ embraces far more than beliefs and doctrines, and simply atomising beliefs fails to capture the experience of living both in community with its ‘relatively’ shared vision, value system, spirituality, customs and mores, and in a global community of diverse communities.

Moreover, as Armstrong (2009) has argued when writing about the Semitic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, faith, historically speaking, has always been a matter of practical insight and active commitment (conceptualisations and visions of ultimate reality were understood in the realm of mythos and had little do with abstract belief or theological conjecture-logos). Armstrong informs us that Judaism and Islam have remained religions of practice; they promote orthopraxy – right practice – rather than orthodoxy – right teaching. She notes:

The fundamental message of the Qur’an was not a doctrine but an ethical summons to practically expressed compassion: it is wrong to build a private fortune and good to share your wealth fairly and create a just society where poor and vulnerable people are treated with respect. (Armstrong 2009, 101)

The five pillars are a *miqra* (a calling to action). In Islam *iman* (faith) is what you do. As Mitch Albom’s ageing Rabbi says in *Have a Little Faith* (Albom 2009, 44): ‘faith is about doing. You are how you act, not just how you believe’. Interestingly Strhan (2010, 39) gives an example of a member of a local synagogue explaining to her Year 7 class that he does not pray because he believes in God but because his father did it and his father before that and so on. He states: ‘Doing this is holy for me because it carries on that tradition’.

It is important to recognise the substance of Wright’s argument, for example, in his later work about the need for RE to address what religious traditions understand about ultimate reality. Where I diverge from the views of Barnes and Wright is that I would question the strong claim made by both of them that the different understandings of reality that we find among the religions are as incompatible as they suggest (Hick 1989; Teece 2005) and as Smart warned over 40 years ago (Smart 1968). Without a sensitive understanding of religious experience there is a real danger of dismissing religious ‘truth’ claims as outmoded and not relevant to the world of young people today (for an interesting discussion of how many young people have a narrow understanding of religious claims about Jesus see Walshe-Aylward [2009]).

To reinforce these points and to conclude the section, it is interesting to point out that one does not have to be a religious believer to appreciate this point. As Marxist academic Terry Eagleton (2009, 138) writes:

The Christian way of indicating that faith is not in the end a question of choice is the notion of grace. Like the world itself from a Christian viewpoint, faith is a gift. This means among other things that Christians are not in conscious possession of all the reasons why they believe in God. But neither is anyone in conscious possession of all the reasons they believe in keeping fit, the supreme value of the individual, or the importance of being sincere. Only ultra-rationalists imagine they need to be. Because faith is not wholly conscious, it is uncommon to abandon it simply by taking thought. Too much else would have to be altered as well. It is not usual for a life-long conservative suddenly to become a revolutionary because a thought has struck him.

### **Conclusion: some tentative suggestions of a way forward**

So to conclude, in order for RE to either re-discover or even discover an identity for the storms ahead<sup>3</sup> we need to prioritise its many aims and continue the debate about how religion might best be conceptualised in RE. My view is that we need other interpretations of religion, not necessarily to replace the current orthodoxy, which conceptualises religion as largely doctrinal and truth claiming, but to enrich the subject and to better represent the realities of religious life.

I have argued in a number of places (Teece 2008, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, forthcoming) that John Hick's interpretation of religion as a second-order explanatory framework, which interprets religions as human responses to the transcendent and does not distort religions at a descriptive level,<sup>4</sup> can be a helpful interpretive tool for enabling religious educators to represent religions in RE. What is interesting about Hick's work for the religious educator is his attempt to articulate a religious interpretation of religion. In his chapter in Bates et al., Hick (2006) discusses the question 'What is religion?' and develops the Wittgensteinian argument about family resemblance concepts, which he first outlined in his *Interpretation of Religion* (1989). Religion 'has no common essence but links together a wide range of different phenomena... The network can be stretched more widely or less widely'. In its widest usage, according to Hick, it can include Soviet Marxism, while in terms of a more 'compact' use religion 'requires some kind of belief in a transcendent supernatural reality'. He then goes on to say that the wider and narrower uses are relevant to different interests so sociologists will be interested in flinging the net as wide as possible, while the 'great world faiths' will be interested in narrower usage focusing on the centrality of the transcendent. It is not the case that 'one usage is correct and the other wrong, but that they serve different legitimate purposes' (Hick 2006, 63–64). So, the legitimate purpose of the study of religion in RE should reside in the centrality of the transcendent. But in emphasising the need to engage students with religion's claims about the nature of reality we must not lose sight of the fact that these are not just ideas but religious ideas (Smart 1968, 15) and that means placing them firmly within the context of religious experience.

### **Notes**

1. I refer here to Philip Taylor's distinction (Taylor and Richards 1985) between the intended and operational curriculum. The intended curriculum being what RE literature, syllabuses and frameworks conceptualise as the nature and purpose of the subject and the operational curriculum which describes what is actually taught and how.
2. What I am suggesting here is that if academic disciplines called Geography or History, for example, form the basis of the geography and history school curriculum it has always been a contentious and unresolved issue as to what academic discipline (or disciplines)

- be it theology, religious studies, philosophy, sociology etc., form(s) the basis for the RE curriculum.
3. This is a phrase used by Mark Chater in his address to a symposium on 'What's worth fighting for in RE' held in London in March 2011.
  4. Proudfoot (1985) is illuminating here when he distinguishes between 'descriptive reductionism' and 'explanatory reductionism'. According to this distinction, descriptive reductionism is the failure to identify a religious experience by which the subject identifies it. Explanatory reductionism, on the other hand, offers an 'explanation of an experience that are not those of the subject and that might not meet with his [*sic*] approval'. Proudfoot claims that this is perfectly justifiable and is normal procedure. The argument is that Hick's interpretation of religion is a second-order explanatory framework that is not guilty of descriptive reductionism (Teece 2010a).

### Notes on contributor

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