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Decolonising the Religious Education Curriculum

Religion and Education at the Epicentre of Empires

Since the fifteenth century until the era of decolonisation in the twentieth, religion and education were at the epicentre of all European Empires. That is, wherever Christian missionary activity met economic and imperial expansion into the ‘New Worlds’ – of North and South America – or the continent of Africa, across Asia, in Australia, across the South Sea, throughout Oceania (Hastings, 1999). Physical journeys of exploration to ‘new’ lands would open up opportunities for the expansion of power. Competition for commerce was the mainstay of European power for centuries, but the cultural expansion of European ideas on civilization were the bedrock of its success. Mere military conquest and economic exploitation could never have been sufficient for the maintenance of colonies across the world, which would last not merely decades but centuries. One of the critical components of this cultural expansion was the spread of Christianity, initially of Catholic and then, in the wake of the Reformation, Protestant. These colonial histories were complex and long-lasting. The nuances of each stage of settlement is far beyond a single article or editorial.

There is one critical strain of educational and theological logic in this history of colonialism and imperialism, one that is and remains integral to history of conversion. Even if here there are considerable differences between the emphasis of Catholic and Protestant missionary activity – Spanish and Portuguese Catholic efforts at inculturation of local traditions across Central and South America, for instance – that differ greatly from the emphasis on Biblical literacy, particularly that of the King James Bible, in the Protestant missionary work of the British Empire in all quarters of the globe (Chidester, 2014; Gearon, 2013; Ngũgĩ, 1986). If anything, Protestant missionary work which went hand in hand with the expansion of British Empire, gives the strongest of all exemplar of this educational and theological logic, one which links culture and colonialism. As Gearon (2013), has noted, in the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura*, if God’s revelation was known through his Word, reading God’s Word became critical to salvation, even if such reading was in itself of course no guarantee of salvation. Here, a theology of *sola scriptura* contributed not only literacy in Great Britain but ensured that literacy in English reading and writing went hand-in-glove with the adjunct of missionary activity across the British Empire (Bragg, 2011; Nicholson, 2011). Nicholson’s (2011) book on the King James Bible is not for no reason titled, *When God Spoke English*. The English

language legacy, albeit contested, remains in the postcolonial or neo-colonial present. Despite this integral connection between religion and education in the history of colonialism, with some notable exceptions from nearly two decades ago (Gearon, 2001a; 2001b; 2002), religious education, as a school subject, has little reflected on the role of religion and education, in a way its own role, in the discussion of culture in the age of European empires. And yet, education in religion was itself at the epicentre of the British Empire, certainly and perhaps paradoxically in the (im)morally ‘civilising’ objectives of Empire, often at the exclusion of the indigenous ‘other’ in the colonies because the empire was like in Lord Bryce’s edict, “every man is a wolf to every other man” (see Azikiwe, 1931, 287).

This special issue is to no little degree an effort to contribute to a critical debate, which has only, as this issue goes to print, been accentuated by the worldwide protest movement known as Black Lives Matter in 2020. A single special issue, let alone any of the articles in this collection, could hope to address or resolve the complexities of an historical legacy, which self-evidently has not lost any of its sense of grievance and injustice. Nor, should educational practice or academic discussion shy away from some of the difficult issues, which the 2020 protests around the globe have raised about this sense of historical grievance too often felt as a current and ongoing sense of injustice in the pandemic present. The COVID-19 pandemic might further exacerbate educational inequalities (Du Preez and Le Grange, 2020) and in this sense religious education has an important role to play as it inherently aims to promote social justice and redress past inequalities.

It is possible even to suggest that, while religious education has not directly addressed notions of colonialism in the curriculum or made explicit effort to decolonise its curriculum, the subject’s inclusive stance (e.g. in Western countries) – whether its paramount focus on the plurality of world religions being treated with equality or whether more current movements to the greater inclusivity of secular and religious in the notion of a ‘worldviews’ approach – has, arguably, led the way decades ahead of other subjects in the school or university curriculum.

Religious Education and Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial critiques, including anticolonial perspectives, have long recognised the critical significance of cultural knowledge as much as economic and military control to the enterprises of colonialism and imperialism (for instance, Bhabha, 2004; Césaire, 2000; Fanon, 2001; Said, 1994; Sefa-Dei, 2015). Postcolonial theory as an academic practice has since its inception at the formal end of at least European colonial empires often been charged with a lack of political action. There is, to provide a simple example, much difference in approach between the refined

cultural commentary of Homi Bhabha (2004) or Edward Said (1994) from the radical, even revolutionary approaches of Aime Césaire (2000) and Frantz Fanon (2001). The current move to ‘decolonise the curriculum’ in many sense shows a conjoining of theory and praxis (Du Preez, 2018).

The righteous anger of the first Rhodes Must Fall campaigns in South Africa at the University of Cape Town and UK at Oxford University in 2015 and 2016, respectively, centred intensely around the colonial legacy represented by the statue of Cecil Rhodes, and how this symbolised the failure or reluctance of the academy to decolonise not only education but also the institutions themselves (Du Preez, 2018; Du Preez, Simmonds and Chetty, 2017; Le Grange, 2016; Mbembe, 2016). The removal of Rhodes’ statue at the University of Cape Town in April 2015 and the on-going discussions at Oxford’s Oriel College, point to what is possible but also to on-going challenges to decolonise the curriculum (Arday and Mirza, 2018; Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu, 2018; CHE, 2017; Takayama, Sriprakash and Connell, 2017; Elliott-Cooper, 2018). In the United States (and now worldwide), the Black Lives Matter movement has been given similar intensity following the death of George Perry Floyd Jr. which has led to calls not only for the removal of colonialism’s commemorative and physical legacies, particularly of slavery, but a removal from schools and universities of the intellectual taint of colonialism, especially as manifest in the racism without which many argue it would not have been able to thrive. These historical antecedents are now part of the cultural and epistemological landscape of religious education, never more intensely than in the pandemic present.

| In postcolonial terms, this milieu presents three models of the religious education curriculum and the colonial encounter. The first is the classic model of education and Empire, and sees Christianity as a direct adjunct of European colonialism and imperialism, mirrored in the legislative definition of ‘other’ religious traditions in the curriculum (Gearon, 2001a; 2001b, 2002a). We can even intimate that in the traditional sense of religious education, which blurs the curricula boundaries of civilisation and colonialism, that the subject was integral to Empire, it provided, particularly through the missionary exportation of the Bible a moral adjunct to economic expansionism. If we are inclined here, however, to see Christianity in European terms, and indeed we can how it was central to colonialism, long before the conceptualisation and actualisation of modern European empires, Christianity itself was already a global religion (Hastings, 1999). Arguably, from its origins in the classical centuries of Roman Empire, Christianity, of all of the world’s religion, was the first truly global religion.

The second is historically post-colonial and outwardly shows the steady advance of a culturally pluralistic model. This is one defined by equality of religions and cultures, and

marked by the use of religion in education to enhance liberal, democratic, human rights-oriented goals. It is driven by conjoint legal and sociological imperatives to establish societal models of equality in diverse societies through teaching and learning around religion, and its wider importance of such matters in the public realm more generally (Pirner et al., 2019). Here, in this second model, therefore, the notion of Christianity as a dominant adjunct of (at least western) colonialism and imperialism is an issue of debate and consternation, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. In western Europe, for example in the UK where the commission on religious education has recommended the shift in name and emphasis from religious and secular inclusivity to Religion and Worldviews education (CoRE, 2018), it is possible to argue that religious education has *already* been decolonised. This is because of its rich plurality and ever-careful representation of different cultures and religions with a phenomenological (if perhaps difficult) equality. By contrast, however, as some of the articles in this volume indicate, in sub-Saharan (with a few exceptions, like South Africa) there is on-going debate and resistance against decolonisation efforts in religious education.

A third neo-colonial model shows there is a deeper interpretive complexity. State funded religious education in the first and second models, in historical and contemporary context, plays a critical role in establishing and transmitting political and security hegemonies. Yet the very source of a now increasingly globally adopted model for religious education has its origins in Western values, even to the origins of the United Nations system, itself coterminous with the era of the formally postcolonial. In specific curriculum terms, seemingly laudable model of culturally and religiously pluralistic religious education is European in origin, its interconnection with politically powerful bodies of European governance is self-evident (Gearon, 2008; 2010). Debates around the relationship of the subject to political institutions has itself become part of much heated contestation within the global community of religious education scholars, and has importantly become part of discussion beyond those specialising in religious education (Gearon, 2017; Lewin, 2017). The global exportation of a culturally and pluralistic model of religious education is made even more powerful by the technologically empowered means of knowledge transmission and supported by inter-governmental agencies. Thus, even highly influential, neo-liberal, market driven assessment bodies such as the European-focused Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or the worldwide Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) has now begun to provide assessment indicators of cultural and religious understanding, as in their 2018 initiated *Global Competence Framework* (OECD/PISA, 2018).

The third neo-colonial perspective here thus raises a plethora of power relations in the educational framing of values more generally (Gearon and Kuusisto, 2018). These issues are enduringly prevalent in religious education, a subject which deals so directly with issues not only of cultural, socio-economic and political impacts of religious traditions and worldviews, but deeper claims to the transcendent and truth claims pertaining to existential and eschatological realities beyond the temporal. or academics, If the cultural, socio-economic and political impacts of religious traditions and worldviews are essence of debates around the colonial and postcolonial in education, the religious framing of existential and eschatological realities beyond the temporal cannot be dismissed by academics, policymakers, nor teachers in the practical context of the classroom. Thus, if the term ‘other’ – so much a part of the lexicon of postcolonial theory since Said’s (1990) *Orientalism* – has come to prominence with the teaching of world religions and secular worldviews, the problematics of representation are critical, certainly in the frame of postcolonial theory in education. To give the most often cited example, in Christian majority countries, how are ‘other’ religions represented? How are religions of relatively minority populations represented in the classroom in teaching and learning (see for example, Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2019)? Then there is an issue of broad-sweep distinctions between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’. In the UK at least, there have been claims by bodies representing secular humanism that the adoption of a new name for religious education – ‘Religion and Worldviews’ – by the Commission for Religious Education (CoRE, 2018) has itself prioritised the religious over the secular (BHA, 2018). Are these questions of ‘othering’ pertinent to the debates around decolonising the religious education curriculum? They are, one supposes, if taken as instances of power in the representation of religion in education.

The Special Issue

Theoretical and conceptual

This special issue, however, addresses matters of more direct concern to the historical and contemporary political and curriculum contexts of religion in education, and those now acute debates which explicitly focus on religion in education through the lenses of postcolonial theory and critique, and which directly address the notional trajectory of decolonising the religious education curriculum. One special issue of a single, if prominent journal, cannot address, let alone resolve these matters of considerable complexity. But our editorial team has given careful consideration to initiating an important debate, and re-opening measured discussion of religion in education through postcolonial theory. This is important, as we have said, since religion and education have been conjointly so integral to the history of colonialism

and imperialism, and not simply European empires. The spectre of atheistic autocratic, dictatorial and totalitarian regimes should never here be forgotten. It often is, when the full weight of blame for many ills are laid to Christianity's role for example in the spread of European empires. The wider consideration of empire, as for power itself, are, we realise, matters, which raise intense emotions. To contextualise European empires as part of the broader sweep of human history, itself a history of imperialisms, can prompt vituperative responses, such has been evident at Oxford, for example, in regard to project on Ethics and Empire.

In the opening article, Liam Gearon hints at such a broader frame, demonstrating the relevance of the pandemic present to our special issue theme. 'Religious Education and the Pandemic' here provides a critical, historical analysis of religious education and the pandemic through the perspective of postcolonial theory. Showing through an interdisciplinary lens how colonialism and contagion have conjointly configured cultural and civilizational change, it shows how sources from religious and literary history can illuminate the current critical landscape of decolonisation. It demonstrates, too, the political-theological currency of the metaphor of contagion itself.

The second article by Benjamin Ahme builds on the notion of validity claims within the discussion on international knowledge transfer in religious education as a field of research, three views on the contextuality of knowledge are discussed. It highlights that from a classical perspective in the sociology of science, the issue of validity must be treated irrespective of matters of context. Secondly, from the perspective of postcolonial studies, this naïve view is subjected to critique for being a veiled form of Eurocentrism. Thirdly, these two general views are concretised in light of a reception process bridging the Global South and the Global North. To this end, exemplary factors contributing to the inclusion of Paulo Freire's pedagogical work in discourses on religious education are analysed. What emerges through these analyses is a differentiated view of validity resting on the de- and recontextualisation of knowledge that allows for it to oscillate between different contexts.

Several articles deal with general themes touched on this editorial. Many are geographically specific to national or regional religious education systems and approaches. All have themes, which treat of themes universally applicable to all religious education contexts. The majority of articles are written from locations, which have been part of the colonial and postcolonial experience.

Sub-Saharan Africa

Yonah Matemba's article, 'Decolonising religious education in sub-Saharan Africa' presents an analytical and conceptual prism of the relationship between anticolonialism and education.

Through the lens of an anticolonial (as opposed to postcolonial) analytical framework, this article examines decolonising efforts (and failures) in religious education as a school subject in post-independent sub-Saharan Africa. Critical of the missionary/European epistemological hegemony that continues to render religious education a colonial rather than a postcolonial project, the article argues for a move beyond rhetoric, and calls for the re-conceptualisation of religious education de-linked from colonial/Eurocentric thought patterns and presents an ‘envisioned’ decolonised religious education (post-confessional, inclusive and multi-faith) that speaks to the political and socio-cultural reality of a postcolonial environment in sub-Saharan Africa.

In ‘Religious leaders as regime enablers’ Bekithemba Dube interrogates family and religious studies in the context of religious leaders who serve as regime enablers and resisters in Zimbabwe. He states that some religious leaders have overtly or covertly assumed the role of enablers of the current Zimbabwean political matrix, thereby threatening democracy, social justice and accountability, by using religious narratives to buttress the status quo. He uses critical emancipation research as lens to interrogate religious leaders as regime enablers. The theory exposes and challenges oppression and injustice in and exclusion from social structures. Two questions are raised: What are the trajectories of religious leaders as enablers in postcolonial political discourses? How can family and religious studies tease resistor ideology among learners, to mitigate the challenges posed by enablers? He argues that here is always a price to pay when religious leaders become regime enablers, and there is a need for curriculum that can enact values, such as social justice, equity, and love for humanity, as a counter-hegemonic strategy to mitigate the challenges posed by religious leaders who act as enablers.

In the article ‘Toward the decolonisation of religion education in a pre-service education classroom’, Omar Esau reports on the author’s attempt to decolonise religion education in a pre-service teacher’s classroom at a historically white university in a post-apartheid South Africa. Witnessing a renewed call for the decolonisation of the higher education and the school curriculum against the backdrop of two events, namely, a renewed curriculum policy, Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) and the recent #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests, the author reflects on their academic role at the university as a teacher educator preparing pre-service teachers to teach religion in schools.

Janet Jarvis’ article, ‘Empathetic-reflective-dialogical re-storying for decolonisation’ offers a research-informed pedagogical model for addressing narratives of the colonial and postcolonial in education. The staged processes – appropriate to all phases of education – encourages insightful appreciation of the condition of colonialism itself, and an informed

conversational engagement between the historical and contemporary voices (often deeply conflicted) which permeate the historical metanarrative. The classroom here in the broadest sense is the venue if not for final resolutions but critical clarifications.

In ‘Reading posthumanism and decolonisation diffractively toward (re)configuring an ontoepistemic approach to religion education’, Shan Simmonds and Petro Du Preez critically engage with the approaches that student-teachers are exposed to when teaching and learning about Religion Education in South Africa. Through a diffractive reading of posthumanist theory and decolonial literature, the possibilities of being and knowing and what this could mean for an approach adopted to teaching Religion Education are imagined. Bringing texts in intra-action problematises the colonial, capitalist and patriarchal character of existing approaches to Religion Education, both ontologically and epistemologically. This remains pivotal for a country like South Africa where colonial epistemicide prevails despite it being vehemently challenged.

Middle East

While many articles deal with religious education within the influencing gaze of Christianity as a general context of debate, ‘Between a rock and a hard place’ by Sara Alnufaishan and Nawaf Sari Alanezi examines the notion of decolonising religious and human rights education in relation to a Muslim majority post-colonial country, Kuwait. It provides here a specific treatment of human rights and Islamic education. Arguing that these are work in progress, as is all education, the article presents a critique which is defined as ‘decoupling’ through an empirical study of Kuwait’s university system, contrasting in particular local, culturally inherited attitudes, beliefs and values to universal values of what might be termed a neo-colonial universalist system derived from the United Nations.

Europe

Kathrin Winkler and Stefan Scholz’s article, ‘Subaltern thinking in religious education?’ provides a postcolonial reading of German textbooks. Examining the notion of the disclosure of subaltern thinking in current German language textbooks for religious education, the article provides a postcolonial hermeneutical framing for this analysis, treating of hierarchical relationships, and the ways in which these are unmasked and can be uncovered. The authors argue that this hermeneutical process of can be a useful part of decolonising the religious education curriculum.

Finally, Patricia Kieran and John McDonagh's article, 'The centre cannot hold' draws on a famous and much used phrasing from the poet W.B. Yeats to explore the notion of decolonising the religious education curriculum in the Republic of Ireland, a country which provided an early critical global model of decolonisation from British Empire. The article situates the formal, informal and hidden religious education curriculum in the context of major 'waves' of decolonisation from the foundation of the national system of education (1831) – a mere couple of years from the abolition of slavery by – to the establishment of the Irish Free State (1922), in all of which contexts the Catholicism Church became a powerful manifestation of native culture in the post-colonial era. The article shows however, the historical stages of development in religious education to the present highlight new tensions with international systems and values, once again originating in and symbolised by the United Nations.

An Open Conclusion

In advance of what are now intense cross-disciplinary debates around 'decolonising the religious education curriculum', a series of foundational papers addressing the relationship between religious education and postcolonial theory were published in the field of religious education – for example, Gearon (2001a) 'The Imagined Other: Postcolonial Theory and Religious Education'; Gearon (2001b) 'A Spirituality of Dissent: Religion, Culture and Postcolonial Criticism'; Gearon (2002a) 'Human Rights and Religious Education: Some Postcolonial Perspectives' – and yet, as we have noted, the paucity of further deliberations has been curious, not least for the reasons outlined about the role of religion and education in imperialism, but because in terms of religious education's own 1870 origins in the curriculum of state education coincide with height of British Empire itself. Nevertheless, postcolonial theory itself cannot be seen as entirely cognisant of the role of religion and education in the history of empires. One recent literature review of the field, suggests, for instance, that 'postcolonial theory is a body of thought primarily concerned with accounting for the political, aesthetic, economic, historical, and social impact of European colonial rule around the world' (Elam, 2019). If this is an accurate reflection of the field, and it largely is, postcolonial studies itself has been guilty of a neglect of the role of both religion and education in its critical stances. The decolonising the curriculum movement is unarguably part of a belated recognition of this previous neglect.

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