Article

The Justice of Theory: How and What Do Educational Skills Distribute?

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Abstract: Do educational theories affect enfranchisement asymmetrically? This article analyses two sets of thinking skills in religious education as apparatuses, taking observations and political documents as a starting point. The thinking skills are described in terms of the roles they allocate, the attention and affect they direct, values and truth-criteria they foster, and the extent to which they make aspects of religion visible and invisible. Taking a cue from Butler's question, "When is Life Grievable?", attention is paid more to the distribution of an apparatus than its validity or effectiveness. How do sets of thinking skills distribute opportunities to make particular strategic choices? When is learning truly and equally shared?

Keywords: thinking skills; educational apparatus; just education; religious education; criticism of religion

1. Introduction

"A crucial factor in the proliferation of fields and subfields of inquiry is that our sense of *who the subject of cognition is* and *what should count as an object of knowledge* is fast changing." [1] (p. 83, emphasis original)

What are the consequences of our grief and our profundity? At least since Butler asked, "*When is Life Grievable?*" [2], attention has been drawn to the *de facto* products of our ethical thought, in terms of the neighbourhoods and allies, as well as, inevitably, the borders we assume, maintain, and generate.

There is no reason to restrict this attention to ethical normativity: any theory that directs thought is bound to have such community consequences — educational theory, most of all, with its generalised reflections and definitions of the nature of knowledge and learning across the board. When we define knowledge and learning, we also allocate forms of life to particular spheres of school and society. Pedagogical theory becomes the gatekeeper of truth. Learning and producing knowledge are bodily activities: demography takes place in physical locations; history describes people and events with varying degrees of proximity to learning; and mathematical equations have bearings on personal measurements, social values, and discussions of who counts [3] (p. 100).

In this article, two sets of thinking skills in religious studies will be examined in the context of educational observation and policy documents, so as to identify consequences for social groups and political agency. After a philosophical discussion of the tools for the investigation (in particular, distribution and the apparatus), the two examples are presented as theoretically, well-grounded, and practically significant, in terms of the ways in which groups of citizens are empowered to determine and apply their own values and participate in public conversation. The objective, in this case, is not representative description but theoretical experimentation: not to draw a map, but to make a landing. Examples are chosen (criticism of religion and learning from or about religion) because they demonstrate, particularly well, the distribution analysis being proposed here. Without doubt, other examples would have been less felicitous, but I am arguing for validity, not universality.

The questions underlying these observations are: how do sets of thinking skills distribute opportunities to make particular strategic choices? When is learning truly and equally shared? What are the real-world consequences of our theoretical indecision?

2. Educational Theory

The pedagogical distinction between information and thinking skills is now well established. Similarly, the further taxonomical level of transfer, in recognition of the learners' need for educational guidance both when practicing distilled scientific techniques and while applying these to a complex world. For that reason, pupils should learn both information, thinking skills, and their transference to the world [4] (chapter 3).

We end up with a concept of knowledge detailed in Table 1 (adapted from [5]):

Table 1. Three taxonomic levels.

Taxonomic Level	Place Learnt	Typical Verb	Example
Information	secondary sources; encyclopedia	recall; be aware of; remember; know	Ibsen wrote *Brand*
Skills	workshop; apprenticeship; analytical training	analyse; understand; explain; transform; contextualise	19th century Norwegian background; rhythm and rhyme; ethical discussion
Transfer	primary sources; confronting complex world	assess; choose approach; deploy	choose to read as poetry, play, or polemic; quote in modern discussion; is the Dalai Lama a modern-day *Brand*?

Theory makes the world visible. The situations in which we apply our theory and thinking skills will determine what we see. Apply a theory of mechanics to a body and we become sensitive to its centre of gravity, the planes determined by joints, and the play-off between mass and inertia. Apply a theory of aesthetics to the same body and we become aware of lines of symmetry, ideal shapes, and the effects of varying perspectives. What and who we are varies, according to the kinds of thinking we apply and have applied to us (cf. the Mbembe quotation above).

Some thinking skills are more appropriate than others. Using phonological theory to solve an algebraic problem yields frustration and bewildered instructors. Applying zoological taxonomies to particular social groups and not to others screams colonial management and racism. Learning to choose the right analytical tool for a real-life situation is part of what pupils learn in lessons concerning transfer.

The choice is clearer in mathematics than in the social sciences. Using two-dimensional formulae to solve a question concerning volume is not infelicitous, it is wrong. This is less obviously the case in religious studies, where methods are often considered in isolation (for example, in Brill's eminent journal, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*), rather than as one way, among many, to answer a scientific problem. Even where methods are obviously most appropriate in one sphere of experience, for example, hermeneutic theory for texts, they can be applied globally [6] (chapter 6).

One exception became widely known a short time after its launch, namely the RE-searchers model that emerged from Exeter University [7]. Thinkers behind the model recommend allowing children to confront religious phenomena, whether that be texts, buildings, or rituals, with personalised toolboxes in mind, such as "Ask-it-all-Ava". Pupils then have the chance to consider and compare the results of deploying various tools in different terrain. This is a commendable example of teaching transfer.

While this approach makes some progress beyond monomethodological research, we have yet to see systematic reflection on the political, discursive, and scientific consequences of this methodological pluralism. RE-searchers authors consider the danger to be a small toolbox, rather than an asymmetrically applied one. Choice of method is treated similar

to social pluralism, as morally and scientifically neutral [7] (p. 63). It is a valid challenge, however: what would be the effect of consistently approaching Buddhism, for example, in the company of "Debate-it-all Derek" but Hinduism together with "Have-a-go Hugo"? What happens when theory is distributed? Looking at literature on methods in religious education, we have a wealth of assessments of individual approaches [6,8–12], an emerging methodological pluralism [7], but little reflection on, or observation of, the consequences of an asymmetrical distribution of methods.

The philosophical question underlying the problem of distribution is familiar to moral philosophy. It is all very well to re-state ideals concerning how we ought to be faithful, generous, or welcoming to the other, but what are we to do with *de facto* limitations on attention? If our moral imagination lays close restrictions around who is to count as an "other", no moral imperative is ambitious enough to render human relations just. Moral theory must both prescribe the nature of our relationships and challenge inequality in application. We need both moral compass and encompass, equality as well as imperative [3] (pp. 20, 31) [13] (pp. 105–108) [14] (p. 143) [15] (p. 39).

This is the key in which Judith Butler poses her question "When is life grievable?" It is good and proper to mourn the people with whom we have shared our lives, but grief is also selective in ways that describe our moral sphere: I cannot go to all the funerals in the world. This selectivity is in some ways inherent to mortal limitations: I live in this city (not the next), have met particular people, and speak certain languages. It is visible and can be interrogated in ways that reveal my sensitivity and blindness to injustice and racial prejudice.

> "Forms of racism, instituted and active at the level of perception, tend to produce iconic versions of populations who are eminently grievable and others whose loss is no loss and who remain ungrievable. The differential distribution of grievability across populations has implications for why and when we feel politically-consequential affective *dispositions*, such as horror, guilt, righteous sadism, loss, and indifference." [2] (p. 24, my emphasis)

A response to Butler's challenge, in terms of admitting that "all lives are grievable", is inadequate because it is an admission uttered by both the just and the unjust. Instead, we need to pay attention to what we mean by "all", the *de facto* distribution of our moral attention [1] (p. 147). Given that grief is human, our moral approbation should not merely be reserved for those who grieve well, but for those whose grief encompasses the outcast. It is for this reason that Antigone is the moral exemplar of our time [16,17].

Butler is surely deliberately echoing Foucault with her "affective dispositions". Although there is no space to push the exegetical argument here, Foucault's use of "dispositif" (usually translated as apparatus) framed his strategic analysis by identifying a heterogeneous set of practices, roles, institutions, knowledge, and structures that allow strategies, values, and hierarchies, *inter alia*. It is a way of handling complex reality [18] (pp. 63f) [19] (p. 299). A chessboard is an example of a dispositif, not as the world within (queens, pawns, and bishops) but also entailing the world around the board (players, times, and prestige). Chess rules tie down particular interpretations (such as when this button counts as a pawn) and rules (such as when it is licit to castle). It allows us to see the world in particular ways, identifying heroes and areas of particular conflict. If we know what chess is, we also know whether we are involved in a game or not and our degrees of involvement (an ongoing game in our head, as opposed to a timed game at a table). Particular moves trigger tension, depression, and elation.

The apparatus is particularly felicitous to understanding educational processes because it reflects our understanding that discourse, interventions, and institutions are themselves embedded in each other, as well as in politics, history, and neurology, in such a way that to extract them is to destroy them. There is no asocial education we can observe, so we cannot ignore social factors; there is no non-neurological education. This insight itself obliges us to study more than we can incorporate in finite thought, without compromising the imperative to further our understanding. By identifying in the apparatus, limited sets

of heterogeneous elements, we meet the need for theoretical pluralism, whilst retaining academic focus.

Not all apparatuses are similarly patent. Users are often only aware of the surface effects of many social media, rather than the economic and scientific flows that generate the interaction between sharing my cat's fancy dress and my susceptibility to adverts for blazers. An apparatus frames knowledge, as well as strategy; it is not that this knowledge is illicit or evil, but only when we pay attention to the context in which the knowledge is learned, expressed, and communicated can we take responsibilities for its moral and political consequences.

We are pressed to examine the distribution of educational theories, rather than simply their effectiveness or accuracy; doing so draws us into the realms of knowledge practices and institutions that deploy, and are deployed, through strategies. Distribution and thinking skills are intertwined in apparatuses, and it is only when we have studied all these aspects of our educational taxonomies that we are well placed to evaluate them.

In what follows, I will analyse two sets of thinking skills in religious education as apparatuses, taking observations and political documents as my starting point. The two cases were chosen both for their broad applicability (the political documents are international) and for the fact that they lend themselves to this kind of analysis. They will be described in terms of the roles they allocate, the attention and affect they direct, values and truth-criteria they foster, and the extent to which they make aspects of religion visible and invisible. They also circumscribe what counts as learning at various taxonomic levels. The final discussion will ask how these theories are distributed.

3. Apparatus 1: Criticism

The first apparatus to which we turn is the skill of asserting critical distance between learners and a set of values, the pupil's own or a religion's. Self-regulation and self-distancing are so central to modern western culture that it would take us too far away from present concerns to address it in general. In terms of religious education, it encompasses self-awareness, comparing one's own values with those of others, evaluating commonalities and differences, and even using these to develop better study skills [9] (p. 38). This broad definition is rarely encountered though, and critical distance is most often asserted between pupil and religion: identifying problematic aspects of religion [11] (p. 73f), distanced judgment of religious ideas [9] (p. 72), and in general the objective, critical, and pluralistic study of religion (see the Folgerø vs. Norway judgment in [11] p. 68f).

This approach to religion is a skill, rather than mere information in our above taxonomy. It is a matter of information that traditional Islamic hudud rules require the death penalty in certain circumstances. It is a matter of judgment whether such a penalty could ever be legitimate or would count as murder, in this case (as in any instances of capital punishment).

The example taken from Islam is chosen deliberately: education about Islam has become more and more integrated into European nations' anti-extremism policies [20] (chapter 7). Nation states have an interest in discouraging citizens from joining militant Islamist groups and from engaging in violence towards Muslim communities.

In an attempt to discern the effects of refracting knowledge about religion through both journalists' and teachers' professional framing, Audun Toft observed the treatment of Islam in fifty religious education lessons [21]. His findings allow us to reconstruct the apparatus of criticism of religion in the classroom.

Toft found that criticism of religion distributes and organises knowledge and attention (as we would expect from a higher skill), regardless of whether the teacher is critical to accounts found in the media. If a teacher accepts the account of Islam given by news media (determined as it is by the duty to report on international affairs, the market value of excitement, and breaches of the norm), then religious violence constitutes a substantial part of the taught curriculum. However, the sophisticated and source-critical teacher's attempts to correct that view of the religion equally results in the same prioritisation of the

topic. In short, whether teachers believe Islam is violent, in principle, or not, they devote attention to the question.

This criticism of religion influences, inflects, and selects the questions by which we interrogate religious thought. News media are not treated as sources of truth, but as directors of attention. Similarly, Toft's informants deploy primary sources as counterpoints to the news media's claims (Islam is not, in principle or demographically, violent), whilst singing in time with its selection of focus (talk about Islam implies talk about violence). News media are, therefore, organisers of knowledge, whether accepted as providers thereof or not.

A further consequence for the shaping of knowledge, when criticism of religion becomes an essential part of religious education, is the distribution of ethical roles. Here, I am reflecting on issues Toft does not explicitly treat in his article. The assessment of the place of violence in a religion puts religious ideals, actions, and rules in the dock. However normative the religious phenomenon under discussion, it becomes the object of another normativity in the process of the criticism of religion. Toft himself includes a dialogue to emphasise the attention given to "sensational and problematic" religion, but note also the sources of judgment in the exchange:

- Boy: One of them says that hudud is just a small part of sharia.
- Hanne: Well, he's got a point there. And then?
- Boy: And there he stops.
- Hanne: Right. And what had you expected, or wished, he'd say in addition to that?
- Boy: That they don't want it practised.
- Hanne: Right. Because there is no doubt that these punishments violate human rights [21] (p. 333).

Here, a tool of ethical and legal judgment (sharia) is assigned the role of case, so a further ethical and legal tool (human rights) can be exercised upon it. We could imagine the reverse question being considered, namely "How defensible is it according to God's law for the International Criminal Court to facilitate the trial of prisoners by those who are neither their peers nor their co-citizens?", and indeed, such discussions do take place in other circumstances.

This educational practice is not illegitimate. On the contrary, education should be critical and pupils should learn the ethical independence to resist their political and religious authorities on the grounds of conscience, however provisional and problematic that may be. The Toledo document was surely right to ground the inclusion of particular religions in national curricula in the need for pupils to unlearn or refute prejudice and stereotypes connected to those religions and to read critically news media that refer to them [11] (p. 42). However, we also need to be aware of the practical epistemological consequences of this treatment.

Unfortunately, Toft's research has not been replicated to examine the classroom criticism of other religions. There is reason to suspect that Islam is, if not unique, at least more than usually amenable to this kind of treatment in European countries (at least in Scandinavia, where this research was carried out). While we would not want to abandon criticism of religion, the asymmetrical application of this educational approach would be deeply problematic. Debates concerning the criticism of religion have largely taken place in general terms, which misses the point of distribution. Educational systems and the bildung of critical citizens should be able to subject ethical systems, such as Utilitarianism, to ethical critique; however, treating one religion, in particular, to such treatment is surely religious (and thereby, often racial) discrimination. If we subject sharia law to ethical judgment but not the ten commandments, natural law, or varnashrama dharma, then we face serious questions about the justice of the distribution of our educational methods.

4. Apparatus 2: Prepositions in Religious Education

The past half century of European research in religious education has been marked by discussions of the prepositions describing its enterprise: learning about religion; learning

from religion [8,22,23]. The choice is a founding moment of the field of religious education research and has filtered into political documents:

> ""Learning about religion" includes enquiry into, and investigation of, the nature of religions, their beliefs, teachings and ways of life, sources, practices and forms of expression. It covers students' knowledge and understanding of individual religions and how they relate to each other, as well as the study of the nature and characteristics of religion. It includes the skills of interpretation, analysis and explanation. . . . "Learning from religion" is concerned with developing students' reflection on and response to their own and others' experiences in the light of their learning about religion. It develops pupils' skills of application, interpretation and evaluation of what they learn about religion." [11] (footnote 52)

Recent valuable attempts to get past this debate deploy a variety of methods [7], re-examine founding definitions [12,23], and replace the choice with "learning how" [8]. By taking my cue from political documents, however, I am directing attention towards the logic and social consequences of the apparatus, rather than its historical development. The choice implies different information and skills. What practical differences for knowledge production and distribution does it have?

4.1. Learning Object

What do I know when I learn in religious education? To learn *from* and *about* religion implies divergent learning objects. When learning *about* religion, religion is not the method, but the object of knowledge. No sphere of human life is necessarily excluded, academics have discussed the psychology of religious people, their diet, economic practices, and sexual preferences. In each of these cases, the sphere of activity is only interesting to the extent that religious phenomena are the object, both ideas and practices, regardless of how well-founded or systematised. Learning *about* religion is an area study: if it be defined by method, this is because religions are considered uniquely receptive to one particular approach because they differ from other parts of the universe (a view I do not share), and not because the approach itself is religious.

Knowledge, produced when learning *from* religion, is only limited by the historic interests of the religion in hand. Religious texts have considered such diverse subjects as legal affairs and astronomy, from the ethics of taxpaying to the structure of the liver. Religious thinkers have also considered the practice and status of secular knowledge, and so education itself is also the object of learning (when learning *from* religion). Religion is only the learning object to the extent that religions speak about themselves (which accounts for only a fraction of religious knowledge). Most of the time, religion is the approach, and the world is the object.

Learning objects are defined by field when religious education is *about* religion, but by approach when it is *from* religion. The debate distributes attention: towards religions themselves on the one hand, and towards religious matters on the other.

4.2. The Role of Religious Agents in Knowledge

If the aim is knowledge *about* religion, religious agents have unquestioned status as informants. There is no reason to discount their statements or criticise them because it is not the job of the religious educator or student to agree or disagree with them. Religious statements are simply data and even explanations, recommendations, and inconsistencies that involve no dialogue between analyst and informant because all these utterances count as observables. In Buber's terminology, the knower of religious education *observes* or *looks on* informants, rather than *becoming aware* of them [24] (pp. 10–12). This apparatus deploys explanations to fit the data, rather than to discuss with the informants themselves.

When learning *from* religion, the learning subject enters into dialogue with the religious agent. Religious words and actions no longer form the data under discussion but the entry ticket to religious education. For example: the discussion of how to deal with suffering is part of religious education to the extent that religious voices participate but learning

from those voices means taking them seriously, rather than describing them. Taking them seriously, in turn, means insisting they make sense and keeping to the subject at hand. If they are inconsistent, we must require them to explain themselves so that the discussion of suffering may proceed.

Both learning *from* and learning *about* religion require religious agents to count as religious, in some sense, but for very different reasons: learning *about* religion has nothing to describe if the religious agent is not religious after all and learning *from* religion continues to have a discussion but can no longer be included in religious education, unless the agent with whom we are confronted is indeed religious. This does not, of course, imply that they need be orthodox. Both learning *from* and learning *about* religion is able to function with agents that are both accepted and rejected by religious communities and authorities, as long as it makes sense to call them religious.

The question of what constitutes a religious person is, therefore, left entirely untouched by this debate. Other apparatuses configure inclusion in different ways, such as religious ritual and state statistics. Educational theory is parasitic on such configurations, rather than contributing to them. Our apparatus configures and distributes the role of religious agents in conversation, rather than their identity. When learning *about* religion, conversation functions as an empirical interview; when learning *from*, as an academic dialogue.

4.3. Emic and Etic Knowledge

It is tempting to overlay the about/from distinction with the etic/emic. The first of each pair emphasises the role of the knowing subject not engaged in religious thought, with the latter one who is [25]. This temptation, however, ignores the nature of the alternatives in both cases. Whereas etic knowledge is famously in competition [26] (pp. 8–28) with emic knowledge (are we best served with description and explanation of religious worlds that themselves make use of terminology and forms of explanation, implied by participation therein?); learning *about* religion is not the same epistemic project as learning *from*, because they have two distinct objects. I cannot discuss the choice of scientific method unless we are discussing one particular project or sphere. I can only choose whether to use a microscope or a telescope in physics if I know whether I am studying molecules or stars. Discussing tools without agreement concerning the observational object is meaningless.

The choice of emic or etic knowledge is meaningful when the aim is to give an account of religious worlds, including both practice and knowledge. As such, it is part of the project of learning *about* religion. Religious knowledge produced from within that world is the *explanandum*, and the analyst must then choose between an *explanans* posited in terms borrowed from that world ("priests are only legitimate by virtue of apostolic succession") or one posited in terms foreign to that world ("religious capital is distributed through a ritually performed and doctrinally warranted non-genealogical series of men"). The question of whether predictions made on the basis of factors not acknowledged by the world's "players" have any validity is real and makes sense when learning *about* religion.

The choice of emic or etic knowledge makes little sense, however, when the aim is to learn *from* religiously produced knowledge (again, unless the religion is describing itself). Here, the insights gained from within the religious world need to be accessible to all and making adjustments based on the experience and insight of non-religious agents makes no difference to the learning object. Pupils still learn *from* religion, even when that religion is unbalanced and shared by few or polemically inflected. For example, learning about suffering from the mystical, but idiosyncratic, thought of Simone Weil is still learning *from* religion, even if it cannot be generalised to any religious community. The quality of the account given of religious thought makes no difference to that of the insights gained concerning the world (although it is possible to move between those projects). Once it makes little difference to the learning object how well religions are portrayed, the emic/etic distinction is rendered otiose. The apparatus, therefore, distributes the possibility of making an emic/etic choice.

4.4. Standards of Truth

The choice concerning learning *about* or *from* religion distributes standards of truth. Different epistemic projects not only use religious agents differently, with diverging conceptual frameworks and ideal learning objects, they also assess truth claims (each in their own way).

Learning *about* religion is bound by considerations of comprehensiveness and best fit. If a claim about the nature of a religious practice takes no account of religious self-understanding, it is not incorrect but incomprehensive, and a new claim is needed to account for the religious knowledge itself. The ideal is an account of a religion that binds together both religious thought and practice.

For example, describing Buddhist asceticism as a play-off between sensual and philosophical fulfilment is not invalid in the face of monks' statements that their choices are the only path to true joy, it merely commits the researcher to an explanation of those statements, as some form of self-deception or discursive splintering. Similarly, describing Buddhism as a genuinely-held theory concerning the avoidance of suffering accounts for philosophical orthodoxy, leaving the practice of the masses of lay faithful Buddhists unaccounted for. Religious standards and processes of knowledge production do not contribute to this thinking skill but are, themselves, to be described by it. Neither personal operations on the self that produce or hinder honesty (such as confession) nor standards of assessment (such as hermeneutical tools and institutions of doctrinal judgement) play any role in the production of knowledge *about* religion. If it is uncovered that learning *about* religion appeals to them in some form (say by academic practices rooted in religious institutions or a hagiographical register seeping into historiography) then that would count as a critique, rather than contribution, to the epistemic project.

Learning *from* religion, however, has an ambiguity at its core. If it is defined as learning *from* individual religious people, texts, and thoughts, then the shift in the learning object does all the work in setting the standards of truth. If a text describes social order, the standards of political philosophy might be appropriate, with its ideals of justice, knowledge of human habit, and realism about social behaviour. If a religious individual constructs ethics, then moral philosophy will place the measuring stick.

If we are discussing learning from religion, rather than religious individuals, however, then a Pandora's box of questions opens, regarding what counts as religious knowledge. Not only must we patrol the borders of learning (when the pious Galileo ceases to speak qua Catholic and takes up a more secular idiom, then we are within our rights to dismiss him from the discussion of religious knowledge) but we must also pay attention to the centre of orthodoxy. While it is legitimate in the schoolroom to learn unorthodox ideas from orthodox teachings (the Good Samaritan might teach pupils to abandon any kind of constricting religious identity), the task still requires us to mark distance from that centre. Agamben is, for example, an exemplary exponent of the philosophy of Foucault when he writes:

> " . . . whenever we interpret and develop the text of an author in this way, there comes a moment when we are aware of our inability to proceed any further without contravening the most elementary rules of hermeneutics. This means that the development of the text in question has reached a point of undecidability where it becomes impossible to distinguish between the author and the interpreter. Although this is a particularly happy moment for the interpreter, he knows that it is now time to abandon the text that he is analyzing and to proceed on his own." [27] (pp. 12–13)

The alternative would be to either rigorously keep to the strict philological meaning of Foucault's words or to manipulatively recruit him as a supporter for one's own philosophy, without doing the hard work of exegesis. If learning *from* religion is itself to abstain from interpretive violence and still to be distinguished from learning *about*, then it must be both sensitive to orthodoxy and attentive to the orthodoxy's object. So historical processes

of institutional judgement are relevant but not finally determinative. Apparatus two, therefore, distributes the relevance of orthodoxy and religious attempts to make sense.

5. Discussion: Political Consequences

The political consequences of our first apparatus are already noted: when religions are treated as objects of critique, whatever the conclusion of that critique, moral and legal agency is reassigned. Asymmetries in this treatment among religions will result in the asymmetrical distribution of such agency among religious communities.

The epistemic practices of apparatus two also overlap with political operations. The global nature of learning *from* religion implies that religious contributions not only count as religious education, but also as whatever fields are under discussion. So, the discussion of Muslim legal theory is the way real Muslims discuss public law, and debates concerning the relation between suffering and cognitive constructions is the way Buddhists think through psychological wellbeing. Both these issues, along with others, such as biology, political expression, history, and personal identity, are also treated in other academic subjects but in such ways that religious pupils have to learn another register to take part in that discussion.

No one is suggesting that instruction concerning all these subjects be taken out of school and left to religious communities, but unequal degrees of ownership of terminology and different degrees of social pressure on these subjects do make a difference to pedagogical agency. We need to take children's pre-existing understandings of reality seriously: "learning is enhanced when teachers pay attention to the knowledge and beliefs that learners bring to a learning task" [4] (p. 11) [28]. As Habermas points out, translation from sacred to secular discourse constitutes an "asymmetric distribution of cognitive burdens" in ways that are inimical to democratic procedures [29] (p. 10). There is a case to be made for providing contexts, in which religious knowledge can be not only described but listened to and exposed to academic debate. This is the nub of the debate concerning public, non-confessional religious education.

The point of the current investigation is not to move this debate forward but to identify the asymmetries produced while discussions are ongoing. Whatever we may think concerning the general advisedness of learning *from* religion, we have to live with the political consequences of real-life educational choices in the meantime. These consequences make urgent the need, pointed out by Butler, to move from principles to distribution.

To date, no empirical investigation has demonstrated how these apparatus two approaches to religious education are distributed across demographic or religious groups. This, in itself, is interesting, given the prevalence of the discussion of these prepositions in research in religious education. The field is largely divided between studies that refer to religion in general, and those that specify one religion in particular. One exception is the English survey of learning materials, which covers a variety of individual religions, rather than summa rising materials' treatment of religion, per se [30].

This reluctance to observe the distribution of theory is understandable. Although the epistemological and political consequences of these two approaches are concrete and identifiable, hard and fast ways of coding instances of learning *from* or learning *about* have yet to be identified. It is not at all evident that the statement "Buddhist meditation is intended to tackle the observer's contribution to evil in the world" is part of a discussion of meditation (learning *from*) or Buddhism (learning *about*). This difficulty can either be overcome or avoided: the English study essentially relied upon the academic discernment of expert readers, rather than designing, negotiating, and testing reliable sets of indices and applying them to the data.

There are, however, signs that an asymmetrical distribution is observable. Comparisons of the expert readings in the English study indicate that religions are treated in different ways. Particular religions have their unique educational pitfalls: for Judaism, overexposing commonalities with Christianity and forcing the material into a Christian framework; for Hinduism, neglecting details of philosophical and ethical beliefs; for Bud-

dhism, obscuring lived religion among ethnic minorities [30] (p. 209). It is possible to describe the field, even though the attempt is rarely made with robust empirical tools.

We also know about parts of the picture: in two studies of learning materials in Norway [31] and [32], Thomas and Rolin identify asymmetries in the distribution of two phenomena that might serve as indices for the distinction between learning *from* and learning *about*. On the one hand, coding sentences that direct attention towards either religious ideas or religious people showed that chapters on Christianity and Buddhism fronted ideas significantly more than people (when compared to chapters on Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism) in their material. On the other, counting the kind of images used to illustrate ideas, rather than display religious phenomena demonstrated the prevalence of that particular technique in chapters of (again) Christianity and Buddhism. Similar anecdotal observations have also been made by others in Scandinavia [10] (p. 18) [33] (p. 81) [34] (pp. 106–108), but it is likely that other configurations are to be found elsewhere.

Given that these studies find asymmetrical distributions of thinking skills in religious education, it seems essential that we understand their consequences for the classroom. Instead of arguing with [29] (pp. 11–13) for the democratic enfranchisement of religion per se, we can combine these two kinds of study (the one on the empirical observation of the distribution of theory and the other on the politico-epistemological consequences of different theories) to uncover the inequalities we should be aware of.

The international conversation concerning the pedagogical and political expedience of introducing religious practitioners to the classroom is, and should be, ongoing. However, the inequality produced by using a priest as a religious *expert* and imam as a religious *informant* should be obvious to all. A consensus may be emerging that religious orthodoxy is irrelevant to religious education, but until that distinction has been achieved in the classroom, representing one religion through a heavily discussed prism of theological discussion and another through that of populistic fringes prejudices classroom discussion. There may be no single obvious answer, as to the purpose of religious education, but if Buddhism is treated as a voice to be heard (learning *from*) and Hinduism as a social group to be governed (learning *about*) then that will have consequences for the ways in which individual pupils experience enfranchisement in the classroom.

6. Conclusions

Jennifer Gonzales makes the following observation concerning pedagogical theory:

"I don't know if there has been any research on this, but this, in the eight years I've been doing this, this seems to be a trend in that when you, when you go to schools in more economically disadvantaged areas, you tend to see more of the kind of sit and do a packet work . . . versus when you go to a very wealthy school, the kids are sitting around small Harkness tables and having discussions and doing project-based learning and having plenty of time for independent reading. So those best practices really aren't being doled out in equitable ways either. And so if we want to give all of our students as much opportunity as possible, we need to make sure that teachers in all schools are using the best literacy practices." [35]

Good theory for all. There is no doubt that the attempt to work out and promote a politically responsible and empowering pedagogy is receiving a great deal of attention today. Paulo Freire's star hangs high, still [36]. However, Freire's practice is just as important as his theory: his practice paid attention both to a responsible pedagogy (object-oriented and politically ambitious) and to the population receiving it (the disenfranchised); subsequent educational thought has isolated the first, at the cost of the second.

The above analyses have identified particular features of existing thinking skills in religious education that put pressure on the ways in which the taxonomic level of transfer is taught. We may want our pupils to be able treat religious agents as informants, as well as to critically engage with the big ideas found in the art and literature of all periods and regions of the planet. There are, however, political and ethical consequences to these skills and applying one approach to religions from one area of the world and another to

those from another produces concrete asymmetries not transparent to mere theoretical and methodological discussion. Teachers need to know that the methods they deploy in the classroom need to be assessed by more standards than the learning effect.

The distribution of our high pedagogical ideals may reveal problematic asymmetries in our attempts to achieve just educational systems. If we treat minority and indigenous thought systems more as objects of critique and mapping than as sources of insight and dialogue, then we are actively disenfranchising the student populations allied to those ways of thinking. If the reverse is the case, concerning the thoughts of strong white male philosophers, then we are maintaining their privilege.

Only vigilant attention to the distribution of sets of thinking skills will tell us whether this is the case or not. Unless we study both theory and its distribution, we cannot claim to be taking educational equality seriously.

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