Studying Religions: The Interpretive Approach in Brief

by Robert Jackson

(published by the European Wergeland Centre, 2009; references updated 2012)

Professor of Religions and Education, University of Warwick, UK and Professor of Religious Diversity and Education, European Wergeland Centre, Oslo, Norway.

The Interpretive Approach

The interpretive approach aims to provide methods for developing understanding of different religious traditions that can be used by all children of school age. The interpretive approach aims to increase knowledge and understanding and it sets out neither to promote nor to undermine religious belief. The interpretive approach takes account of the diversity that exists *within* religions, as well as between them, and allows for the interaction of religion and culture, for change over time and for different views as to what a religion is. It can begin with examples from religious traditions, or it can begin with students' questions and concerns. This does not matter, provided the three key inter-related concepts of representation, interpretation and reflexivity are covered. The interpretive approach does not impose any particular view of the nature of truth on to learners. The intention is to enable learners to formulate *their own* views and to relate these to their previous learning and understanding.

The interpretive approach was developed at the University of Warwick in England (Jackson 1997, 2004; 2005a, b, c), and has been used in other countries, such as Germany, Norway and South Africa. Its methodology emerged from the experience of field studies of children and young people from different religious backgrounds in Britain, using the methods of ethnography or social anthropology (e.g. Jackson and Nesbitt 1993; Nesbitt 2004), and experience of attempting to give children from a range of different backgrounds a voice in the classroom, together with insights from literature from other fields, such as hermeneutics (theory of interpretation), social psychology and cultural theory. The interpretive approach employs three key concepts in relation to the analysis of religious diversity, namely representation, interpretation and reflexivity.

Representation

Using scholarly sources from cultural theory and the history of the portrayal of religion and religions in Western literature, the approach emphasises that representing „world religions" as homogeneous systems of belief tends to produce oversimplified accounts which often do not correspond to the experience of believers and practitioners (Flood 1999; Said 1978; Smith 1978). In the interpretive approach, religions are pictured flexibly in terms of a relationship between individuals within the context of particular groups and wider religious traditions. The study of individuals, in the context of the various groups with which they are associated, informs an emerging understanding of religious traditions. At the same time, key concepts from the religions are exemplified and enlivened through the consideration of particular examples of religious faith and practice. There is no suggestion that

we should never use the names of the religions, or should not think of religions in some contexts as 'wholes'. The key point is that accounts of all religions are contested by insiders as well is by scholars who may or may not be outsiders. Looking at the interplay between individuals, groups and traditions shows the complexity of representing religions, as well as bringing them to life, and also showing how individuals fit into groups and broad traditions.

The approach is also critical of simplistic representations of cultures and of the relationship between religion and culture which see religions and cultures as internally homogeneous. Key debates in social anthropology and other social sciences are utilised in developing more sophisticated models of the representation of cultures, cultural processes and ethnicity (e.g. Barth 1981; Baumann 1996; Clifford 1988). "Cultures‟ are seen as dynamic, internally contested and fuzzy edged, while individuals are recognised as capable of contributing to the reshaping of culture through making personal syntheses which might draw from a wide range of cultural resources, including their own ancestral traditions. The approach thus takes on board both the dimension of „traditional‟ plurality – the overt diversity to be seen through the presence of different religious and ethnic groups in society – and that of „modern‟ plurality, in which individuals from any background can utilize cultural ideas and practices from many possible sources. The interaction of these two dimensions accounts for some of the ideological and spiritual diversity to be found within religious traditions (Jackson 2004a, 2011b, 2011c).

With regard to the representation of religions, the interpretive approach uses three 'levels'. The broadest level is the *'religious tradition'*. The term „religious tradition‟ is preferred to „religion", although it is recognised that some will prefer to use the latter term in a qualified way. Thus the Christian tradition encompasses all the different denominational and cultural manifestations of Christianity. Immediately it is clear that it would be impossible for any individual to have a full grasp of this. It is also clear that different insiders and outsiders would have different views about the scope of the tradition. This does not matter. Each of us (whether teacher or student) can gradually form our own idea of the traditions and the relationship between them. Every time we learn something new, our previous understanding of the tradition is challenged and might be modified. A discussion and analysis of key concepts fits best into this level, and can help to give a provisional framework for understanding that can be modified as more learning takes place.

The next level is that of the *'group'*. This might be a denominational or sectarian group, or some combination of these with other kinds of group such as ethnic groups. A project or some work based on a family with an Islamic background or on a local church, for example, would be informative about groups, and would also influence and inform our understanding of the wider tradition.

The third level is that of the *'individual'*. Every individual is unique. It is at this level that we can appreciate best the human face of religion and hear personal stories that break stereotypes. Various research projects have shown that individual young people feel that the representations of their religions in many textbooks and resources do not match their own knowledge and experience as individuals living within particular groups and traditions. The interpretive approach aims to give young people their own voice in this respect.

The exploration of the relationship between these different 'levels' can be liberating. You do not feel that you have to know everything, because every example studied illuminates the wider picture. The approach is very flexible.

In terms of didactics, it does not matter whether you start with:

- an overview of key concepts from a tradition
- a personal story (whether that be from a visitor to the school or from some other source)
- the study of a group of some kind
- pupils' own previous knowledge and experience (including their own experience of religious practice or the absence of religion from their lives).

If you start with key concepts, then you have to make it clear that you are not giving a definitive account, but are just providing an initial framework for understanding. When you look at some individual examples from real life, the general picture will need to be revised. Similarly, if you start with examples from life, care has to be taken not to generalise from specific cases. The emphasis is on interplay between the particular in the general.

Interpretation

The approach's interpretive methods most closely relate to debates in interpretive anthropology (Geertz 1983; Clifford 1988) and to theory from hermeneutics (Gadamer 1975; Ricoeur 1988). Rather than asking students to leave their presuppositions to one side – as in the phenomenological approach – the method requires a comparison and contrast between the learner's concepts and those of the „insider". The approach employs a movement backwards and forwards between the learner's and the „insider's" concepts and experiences. The goal is to understand the insider's use of religious language as far as an outsider can. *Sensitivity* on the part of the student is very important and a necessary condition for empathy. The other aspect of this hermeneutical approach lies in *applying* the model of representation outlined above – moving to and fro between individuals in the context of their groups and the wider religious tradition. These two elements overlap in practice.

The interpretive methodology was not only influenced by discussions of theory and methodology, but was informed by direct experience of ethnographic fieldwork. Studies of children in Britain from a range of different religious and cultural settings (various Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh contexts) were used as a basis for methodological reflection and as a source of material for curriculum development. Thus the earliest materials produced using the approach presented the ways of life of children and young people, observed and interviewed in the context of their families and communities (eg Jackson 1997, 95-120). Some of the texts were written about young children for young children, using their own personal stories and language (Barratt 1994), while others featured adolescents and were aimed at young people in lower secondary schools (Mercier 1996, Robson 1995, Wayne *et al* 1996). In all cases, the children and young people and their families who were featured in the books had a role in the development and editing of the texts and the selection of photographs. Later developments of the approach used other starting points, such as key concepts or pupils' questions. The approach is flexible and can start at any point on the

hermeneutical circle of learning – examples from religions, key concepts, pupils'experiences and questions.

Reflexivity

The interpretive approach does not simply set out to increase knowledge. It takes the view that, in order to increase understanding, pupils need to reflect on the impact of their new learning on their previous understanding and values. The approach also gives the learner an active involvement in the learning process. Reflexivity covers various aspects of the relationship between the experience of students and the experience of those whose way of life they are attempting to interpret. Three elements are especially important for the interpretive approach:

- *learners re-assessing their understanding of their own worldview in the light of studying people and ideas from a different religious tradition* (called edification in the interpretive approach). For example, it is possible that a learner might express respect for values and practices associated with another's religion, even though the learner is an outsider to that tradition. Similarly, new learning can enable learners to see their own tradition in a new way and can contribute to the modification of their own worldview.
- *learners making a distanced critique of material studied*. Reflecting on the beliefs and practices of those from another group or tradition may reveal aspects with which the learner disagrees. In such cases, the learner might respect the other's right to hold a particular belief or participate in a particular practice, without feeling any deep respect for it. In such cases, the learner tolerates the beliefs and practices of others in the context of freedom of religion or belief within society. Discussions of the truth or falsity of particular religious claims may also take place as part of this distanced critique (see below on the sensitivity required in discussion of truth claims).
- *learners developing a running critique of the interpretive process through the review of methods of study*. This aspect of reflexivity encourages learners to be active participants in the design and review of learning methods.

Approaches to teaching and learning aim to encourage reflection and constructive criticism (including discussions about truth claims where appropriate) and require methods that give a voice to pupils, allowing them to gain insight from their peers and to be able to examine different ideas of truth held within the classroom. The „content" of lessons is thus an interactive relationship between material provided by the teacher and the knowledge and experience of the participants. The approach aims for a conversational form of learning which can accommodate diversity and difference.

Since learning is seen as a hermeneutical process, attention needs to be given to students' reflection on their own worldviews in the light of their studies. Reflexive activity is intimately related to the process of interpretation. Interpretation might start from the insider's language and experience, then move to that of the student, and then shift between the two. Thus the process of

understanding another's way of life is inseparable in practice from that of considering the issues and questions raised by it.

The approach helps learners to engage with difference. Whatever differences there might appear to be between the student'sworld view and the way of life being studied, there may also be points of contact and overlap as well as common elements. What might appear to be entirely different on first acquaintance can end up linking with the learner's own experience in ways that challenge unquestioned assumptions.

Part of the reflexive process is to be able to engage critically with that which is studied. The management of such critical work is an important pedagogical issue, especially in teaching situations that are strongly pluralistic. Pupils need to learn how to be critical in a sensitive and constructive way, and teachers need to do their best to ensure that the classroom is a 'safe space' for such exchange. Another role for criticism as an element of reflexivity is pupils' involvement with reviewing study methods. This can reveal issues of representation and can also generate creative ideas for improvement, in the presentation of material studied to others. It can also help students to become more aware of bias in the techniques used in other forms of presentation (such as in media representations of religions). Other approaches can be used to complement the interpretive approach. For example, ideas from various dialogical approaches complement the idea of edification in the interpretive approach, while the use of philosophical skills might be particularly useful in clarifying or formulating a critique of a particular viewpoint.

Advice for Implementing the Interpretive Approach

You may find some of these suggestions useful in preparing material for teaching:

- Be aware of your own previous knowledge and assumptions.
- Think about the ways in which you interpret what you find. Do you find yourself making connections (bridges) between your world(s) and the worlds of those you are meeting?
- Notice how you revise your understanding of each tradition as you encounter more examples of its practice.
- Avoid, if you can, generalizing about a religious tradition. 'Some', 'a few' and 'many' are useful words to use when teaching about religions. Even more useful is the three-fold structure of individual, group and wider tradition introduced above. One theme that will recur is diversity; and the need to identify strategies that you and your colleagues can use to prevent stereotyping.
- Identify ways in which you can implement the three-fold structure (representation, interpretation, reflexivity) to help you organize material about each tradition/religion effectively.
- Building a vocabulary/concepts list for each tradition will be helpful.
- Contacting friends and colleagues who belong to the faith communities you are studying may build your confidence further
- Question all your sources to find out where the authors/speakers are themselves 'coming from'

- You can start with material from a religious tradition, or with pupils' questions and interests. It does not matter so long as the principles of representation, interpretation and reflexivity are covered during the project

Some Key Points of "Interpretive Approach"

- Religious traditions should be presented, not as homogeneous and bounded systems, but in ways that recognise diversity within religions and the uniqueness of each member, as well as the fact that each person is subject to various influences.

- Students should not be expected to set aside their own presuppositions (as in phenomenology), but should compare their own concepts with those of others in a genuine attempt to understand others' religious language and feeling: 'the students' own perspective is an essential part of the learning process'.

- Students should re-assess their own ways of life; they should be constructively critical of the material they study; and they should maintain an awareness of the methods they are using, reflecting on the nature of their learning. Students should have the opportunity to discuss claims to truth, but such discussions should be sensitive to the feelings of participants – the classroom should be a 'safe space' for discussion.

Some researchers and teachers (and they are often *both* researchers and teachers) have used their own creativity in using and developing the interpretive approach. Some recent developments can be read in a book produced by a 'community of practice', a group of researchers who worked together over a three-year period (Ipgrave, Jackson and O'Grady 2009), and in Jackson (2011a), which describes how the interpretive approach was used as a stimulus for empirical research and pedagogy in the European Commission REDCo Project on religion, education, dialogue and conflict (see also Jackson 2012).

More information about Robert Jackson's work can be found at: http://www.robertjackson.co.uk/ and elsewhere on the EWC [http://www.theewc.org/] and WRERU [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wie/research/wreru/] websites.

References

Barratt, M. (1994) *An Egg for Babcha*, *Lucy's Sunday*, *Something to Share*, *The Buddha's Birthday, The Seventh Day is Shabbat* "Bridges to Religions" series, *The Warwick RE Project,* Oxford, Heinemann. (These 5 texts, written in collaboration with children and their families, tell stories of young children from families of various religious backgrounds, based on ethnographic research data.)

Barth, F (1981), „Ethnic Groups and Boundaries“ in *Process and Forms in Social Life: Selected Essays,* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Baumann, G (1996) *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-Ethnic London*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Clifford, James (1988) *The Predicament of Culture*, Cambridge (Mass), Harvard University Press.

Flood, G. (1999) *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (London, Cassell).

Gadamer, Hans-Georg (1975) *Truth and Method*, New York: Seabury Press.

Geertz, Clifford (1983) *Local Knowledge*, New York, Basic Books.

Ipgrave, J., Jackson, R. & O'Grady, K. (Eds) (2009) *Religious Education Research through a Community of Practice: Action Research and the Interpretive Approach*, Münster, Waxmann.

Jackson, R. (1997) *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach*, London, Hodder and Stoughton.

Jackson, R (2004) *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality: Issues in Diversity and Pedagogy*, London: RoutledgeFalmer

Jackson, R. (2005a) „L'approche interprétative en enseignement religieux: une pédagogie de la comprehension interculturelle“ in Fernand Ouellet (ed.) *Quelle formation pour l'education a la religion?* Quebec, Les Presses de l'UniversiteLaval.

Jackson R. (2005b) Din Egitimi: YorumlayýcýBirYaklaþým. Istanbul, DeðerlerEðitimiMerkeziYayýnlarý (Istanbul, DEM Publishing), (Turkish translation of *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach*)

Jackson, R (2005c) 'Intercultural Education, Religious Plurality and Teaching for Tolerance: Interpretive and Dialogical Approaches', in R. Jackson and U. McKenna (eds) *Intercultural Education and Religious Plurality*, University of Oslo, Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief, 5-13.

Jackson, R. (2009) 'Understanding the religions and worldviews of others', Alliance of Civilizations Forum, Istanbul, Turkey, 6 April, http://erb.unaoc.org/understanding-the-religions-and-worldviews-of-others/ also downloadable from http://www.theewc.org/library/category/view/understanding.the.religions.and.worldviews.of.others.the.alliance.of.civilizations.goals.and.the.interpretive.approach/

Jackson R. (2011a) The Interpretive Approach as a Research Tool: Inside the REDCo Project, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 33 (2) 189-208.

Jackson, R. (2011b) Cameron, 'multiculturalism' and education about religions and beliefs, http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/14271

Jackson, R. (2011c) 'Antiracist Education, Multicultural Education and the Interpretive Approach' in the EWC Statement Series, Oslo, European Wergeland centre, pp 11-13. Also online at http://www.theewc.org/library

Jackson, R. (Ed.) (2012) *Religion, Education, Dialogue and Conflict: Perspectives on Religious Education Research*, London: Routledge.

Jackson, R and Nesbitt, E M (1993) *Hindu Children in Britain*, Stoke on Trent, Trentham.

Mercier, Carrie, (1996) *Muslims*, "Interpreting Religions" series, *The Warwick RE Project,* Oxford, Heinemann.

Nesbitt (2004) *Intercultural Education: Ethnographic and Religious Approaches*, Brighton, Sussex Academic Press.

Ricoeur, P. (1988) *Time and Narrative*, Volume 3. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.

Robson, G., (1995) *Christians*, "Interpreting Religions" series, *The Warwick RE Project*, Oxford, Heinemann.

Said, E (1978) *Orientalism*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Smith,W C (1978) *The Meaning and End of Religion*, London, SPCK.

Wayne, E., Everington, J., Kadodwala, D. and Nesbitt, E., (1996) *Hindus*, "Interpreting Religions" series, *The Warwick RE Project,* Oxford, Heinemann.