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Denise CUSH & Catherine Robinson

Brian Bocking and the Defence of Study of Religions as an Academic Discipline in Universities and Schools

ABSTRACT: In this article we will explore the contribution made by Brian to establishing and defending study of religions as a discipline in its own right and argue for the importance of a holistic and polymethodic approach to studying religions as the most appropriate way forward for programmes for undergraduates at university and students in schools. We will include the major contributions made by Brian in the institutions in which he has taught, with particular attention to our own Bath Spa University. The title "study of religions" - contributed by a student of Brian's - implies something about both content and methodology as well as his attitude towards students as co-participants and potential colleagues. The content is determinedly plural, acknowledging the diversity of religious (and perhaps non-religious) worldviews in the contemporary world. The approach is open and non-confessional, a study rather than endorsement or refutation of the claims of religions. The methods of study are multiple, prioritising neither textual and historical, nor philosophical or theological, nor social scientific approaches. Following in a tradition associated with the name of Ninian Smart among others, we argue that an understanding of religions can only be gained by seeing the relationship between theory and practice, text and context and official doctrines and vernacular custom. Hence Brian and Bath Spa continued to be committed to our students being exposed both to primary texts and direct encounters with living religious communities. Moreover, these polymethodic studies should be undertaken from a global rather than narrowly "Western" perspective, building upon Brian's own specialism in Japanese Buddhism and entrepreneurial international links.

KEYWORDS: Methodological Agnosticism, Pedagogy, Phenomenology, Religious Education, Religious Studies, Ninian Smart

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Introduction

The name study of religions for the discipline previously known as religious studies was suggested by a Bath Spa University student when Brian was Head of Department and has been used in this institution and some others ever since. It was felt that it improved on religious studies in two main ways. First, it emphasises that we are studying religions plural, and second that we are engaged in an academic study rather than an activity that could be understood as itself "religious". That the approach taken to studying religions is open and non-confessional is taken for granted by most "insiders" to the academic subject of religious studies, whatever it is called, but the subject is often misunderstood by "outsiders" as one that is necessarily endorsing either a particular religion, or a religious outlook on life more generally, and that the study is engaged in by believers/adherents. The misunderstanding is in part because of a lack of distinction made between religious studies and theology, and also influenced by experience of studying religion(s) in schools, which may be non-confessional and multi-faith, but may be confessional, depending on the type of school attended, where and when.

Even as religious studies, the subject is relatively new in English (and Irish) universities. Although the study of comparative religion has been present in British universities since the beginning of the 20th century (the first Chair being at Manchester University in 1904 [Sharpe 1975, 131-133]) and the origins of the subject lie in the 19th century (Smart 1973a, 9), the first department which used the religious studies title was Lancaster University, when Professor Ninian Smart and others set up a new department in a new university in 1967. The non-confessional, multi-faith approach in schools can be dated to 1969, when the Shap Working Party for World Religions in Education was founded (influenced by the Lancaster department) in England.

The subject in British universities is at present known nationally as theology and religious studies, which rather blurs the boundaries, and is in part responsible for the misunderstandings about the nature of study of religions. The existing and possible relationships between the two disciplines are usefully discussed in Bird and Smith, 2009, but it is interesting to see that the editors conclude that in spite of attempts to be more inclusive "Cush is perhaps right that...the time is not right for scholars of theology and religious studies to develop a single approach" (2009, 12). Historically, and even to this day, theology has a more established place in British universities, and access to patronage and funding from the Church of England and other Christian institutions. Distinguishing study of religions from theology is an important part of explaining what the subject actually is, and a topic on which Brian made a typical and insightful contribution "if you don't know the difference between theology and religious studies, then you're a theologian" (1994, *cited in* Corrywright and Morgan, 2006, 50), although he also adds that you can only repeat that so often (1994, 1). Brian's *bon mot* also hints at the inequality between the two disciplines (as it is always the superior partner in an unequal power relationship that cannot see the problem), and the need for study of religions to defend itself.

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Why Does Study of Religions Need Defending?

There are two senses in which study of religions needs defending. The first is a practical one, where the subject has to fight for its very existence in universities and schools, and the second the intellectual sense in which it must persuade critics that it is actually a subject discipline at all, rather than an area of content that can be examined from a number of different academic fields.

The practical sense is a constant reality for those working in study of religions. In no university is it a major subject numerically and, although the number of pre-university students taking religious studies in England (for Advanced Level examinations) has increased year on year in recent decades, this is not reflected in an increase in the numbers applying to university, which remains steady but small compared to other humanities subjects such as history. Few (if any outside of faith-based institutions) vice-chancellors have backgrounds in religious studies and, in times of financial pressure on university managements, the subject may seem to be an area that could be easily deleted. At the time of writing, the subject is under threat at two British universities, and the University of California, Berkeley has closed its undergraduate programme (Whitley 2015). Whitley comments that religious studies departments find themselves in an "increasingly difficult predicament" in both the United States of America and the United Kingdom, which is particularly strange when religion itself features more and more in public life and the media. He claims that "religionists", "are often quite poor at explaining why what we do matters". Although it may be also partly the disinclination of the powers that be to listen to our explanations, no matter how brilliant, it is certainly also true in Britain that our arguments have failed to make much impact, whether applied to the subject at universities or in schools.

Tempting as it is to give in to paranoia and elaborate conspiracy theories, it is important to explore some of the factors that may be in play. One is the increasing marketization and commodification of the academy. The success of an education is now largely measured (in such instruments as university league tables) in terms of the employment to which it leads, and, even more crudely, the salary earned. Although we would argue that study of religions provides many skills useful for a wide variety of employment, it also introduces students to worldviews where such measures of success are questioned (see Cush and Robinson, 2011). In England, subjects now have to publish data showing the percentage of graduates in "graduate level" jobs six months after graduation. Study of religions graduates may not always come out well on such measures, as they may well have decided to go travelling to experience some of the religions and cultures they have studied or have been inspired to take on a

form of employment or lifestyle that may not rate highly on the "graduate career" measures.

It was noted above that religious studies as a discipline is relatively new, and shares with some other "new" subjects the suspicion that it is not as valuable as established subjects. Sometimes referred to by critics as "Mickey Mouse degrees", some subjects are seen as less valuable either because they do not have the prestige of older disciplines, or because they will not lead to well-paid employment. An example of the former is the omission of A level Religious Studies from the list of "facilitating subjects" which students are advised to study if they want to gain a place at a prestigious "Russell Group" university, and as an example of the latter, the Urban Dictionary (2015) identifies the defining characteristic of such degrees as their uselessness, not least in terms of the career prospects and earning power of graduates. It has been noted that many of these newer degrees - the paradigm being Media Studies - include the term "Studies" in the title which contrasts with the more impressive "ology" of more established subjects in the folklore of "Mickey Mouse" degrees.

At the time when Brian was at Bath Spa University, the subject tended to need defending on two fronts. It needed to distinguish itself from theology and defend itself against secularist critics. In an important paper written for the British Association for the Study of Religions (Bocking, 2000; reprinted Sutcliffe 2004b), Brian argues for study of religions as an academic subject in its own right, heavily influenced by but also building upon the approach established by Ninian Smart at Lancaster, an approach typified by methodological agnosticism in contrast to both theological and reductionist approaches and itself located in the context of philosophical phenomenology (Bocking 2000, 1-2 cf. Smart 1973b, 54). Brian defined the subject by reference to two criteria: the former, the presumption that religion retains its significance against the secularist critics who reject the subject as irrelevant, and the latter, the abstention from assessment of religions' truth claims as the appropriate stance for the scholar focussed on understanding and explanation, thus distinguishing the subject from theology (Bocking 2000, 5-6). Brian did acknowledge that the study of religion had a questionable claim to be a discipline though at the same time he was at pains to point out that this was hardly unparalleled among other subjects, criticising as outmoded the notion that knowledge can be divided into discrete disciplines or, indeed, departments (Bocking 2000, 11-12).

Historically, then, religious studies has sought to carve out a position that is distinct, though not necessarily institutionally separate, from theology on the grounds that theology tends to endorse at least one set of religious tenets, and simultaneously from, for example, the social sciences, even if not to the exclusion of appropriating their methodologies,

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that offer reductive accounts that eliminate all religious explanations in favour of others that seem more scientific and hence more credible. However, study of religions continues to confront challenges posed by sharing its subject matter with other disciplines proceeding from disparate premises. Theology, as explained above, still benefits from considerable prestige and the association with churches while there is also a preference for consulting religious communities on the part of public bodies that indirectly privileges theology. Further, the rise of the "New Atheism" has seen high-profile attempts to undermine the intellectual credentials of religion and, with Richard Dawkins memorably equating a religious upbringing with child abuse despite allowing for teaching about religions for cultural reasons (Cooper 2013), by extension the practice of multi-faith, non-confessional teaching of religions, especially in schools, has been implicated in irrationality and superstition, if not also in the infringement of children's rights through state-sponsored indoctrination.

At the time of writing, the situation has moved to one where, although these traditional foes are still factors, study of religions is under threat from philosophy and ethics, and from an increased interest in religion from subjects such as sociology and politics. First in schools, and then in universities, many students interested in the general area of religions, philosophies and ethics have preferred to concentrate on philosophy and ethics. There are a number of reasons for this. One is that the phenomenological approach of Ninian Smart, as well as being legitimately questioned (on grounds such as lack of sensitivity to gender issues, the challenge of postmodernism, the unequal relationship between the researcher and the researched and failure to examine the category of religion itself [Bocking 2000, 3-4]) has been, rather unfairly, equated with mere description, and in the school classroom, learning obscure and irrelevant facts about a series of discrete religions which are remote from the pupils' experience and interests. This may have become the case in the hands of poorly trained and inexperienced teachers in some classrooms, but it was certainly not true of Smart himself. Back in the late 1960s and early 70s he argued that although the study of religions does not intend "to speak on behalf of one faith or argue for the truth of one or all religions or none" (Smart 1971, 12), it must however "transcend the informative" and "enter into dialogue with the parahistorical claims of religious and anti-religious outlooks" (Smart 1968, 105). What must be guarded against is premature evaluation "once you know what is going on, then perhaps you can be judgemental - of course, you have to be critical" (Smart 1995, 7).

In recent decades, philosophy and ethics (really Western philosophy of religions and religious and humanist ethics) options have dominated religious studies at Advanced Level (students aged 16-18

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years) in English schools. New criteria published by the Department for Education (2015a), after consultation with universities among others, require that students must also include some study of a religion and/or religious texts. Although this is better preparation for theology and religious studies at university, it has been criticised by those who see studying a religion as lacking in critical thinking and /or perpetuating an outdated "world religions paradigm". Neither of these accusations is true of study of religions at its best, whether in schools or universities, and perhaps both accusations owe something to the project of the European Enlightenment that established a distinct break between theology and philosophy, locating rationality with the latter while upholding a Eurocentic paradigm (King 1999, 3). It is noteworthy that, as early as the 1970s, Smart stated that he was "committed to the broadening of the philosophy of religion so that it becomes the philosophy of religion and *religions* (thus escaping the secret identification of religion, in our Western culture, with the Judaeo-Christian tradition)" (Smart 1973a, 7). In the study of religion, he was concerned to promote a global outlook (Smart 1968, 106) and, similarly, he advocated philosophy as a global phenomenon (see, for example, 2000).

Moreover, it is noteworthy that, when changes were proposed to GCSE (16 plus years of age) and Advanced Level examinations in England, those who advocated a concentration on philosophy and ethics rather than the study of religious traditions at Advanced Level argued that the teaching of religions was accommodated at GCSE (see, for example, Candle Conferences 2014) whereas, once it was decided to require the inclusion of religious traditions (DfE 2015b), A.C. Grayling proposed a new GCSE in philosophy on the basis that religious studies is merely informative unlike philosophy which is exploratory and discursive (Wiggins 2015). It is difficult to conceive of any other academic context where "facts", disputed as they may be, are so disparaged or where "facts", important as they may be, are supposed to constitute the whole field of enquiry thereby denying any role for questioning and debating along with, for instance, analysis and creativity. Apart from the observation that this form of rote learning bears little if any resemblance to the aims and objectives of religious education (Jackson 2015), it is abundantly clear that a philosophy GCSE along the lines currently proposed would hardly espouse a global dimension.

In Defence of Study of Religions as a Discipline in its Own Right

The very concept of human knowledge being easily divisible into distinct subject disciplines is a somewhat dated and indefensible one. Nevertheless, in the modernist and competitive world of the

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contemporary university, it is necessary to defend the area in which one works as a legitimate discipline. As Brian argued, the separation between subjects is sustained by quality processes and funding bodies that establish the frameworks within which academic staff have to work (2000, 11-12). With specific reference to the study of religions, Smart had been insistent that it could not be separated from other areas of enquiry and that its scope extended beyond what are generally regarded as religions while identifying a mismatch between this interconnectedness and inclusivity, on the one hand, and the institutionalization of subjects in the organization of higher education, on the other hand (Smart 1973a, 10). So taking as given that there are no such things as subject disciplines, how can we argue that study of religions is a discipline in its own right, at least as much as anything else is?

Study of religions, following in the footsteps of Smart, is proud to be 'polymethodic' (Smart 1973b, 8) drawing upon a wide range of subject disciplines in order to provide a broad and balanced picture of what for convenience we call 'religions'. This strength is, however, also a weakness. If we draw upon disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, literary and cultural theory, languages and archaeology in order to understand religions, why not just let each of these disciplines contribute their particular insights and forget about a separate subject called study of religions/religious studies? The recent decline in the number of university departments with these titles, and absorption of staff into departments of humanities, or philosophy and politics, or social sciences might suggest something of the sort. Would anything be lost?

Apart from the likelihood of religion(s) being only of marginal interest to scholars in other disciplines, it is vitally important that somewhere the various insights into aspects of religious traditions are put together into a holistic understanding of what can be for adherents the underpinning of their worldviews and whole way of life. A balanced understanding of religions can only be gained by seeing the relationship between theory and practice, text and context and official doctrines and vernacular custom. As Sharpe argued, Trevor Ling's description of comparative religion as "the relating of the findings of two separate disciplines, the philosophy of religion and the sociology of religion, each pursued in a world context" (Ling, 1968; discussed in Sharpe 1975, 288) is insufficient but at least captures something of what study of religions as a holistic approach can achieve.

In putting together any argument that study of religions is a subject, it might be expected that one could find a discrete body of knowledge, founding scholars, and a distinct method. Study of religions certainly has a huge volume of possible content. The so-called "world

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religions" such as Islam, Buddhism and Christianity have thousands of years of history, countless subdivisions, are spread throughout many cultures and languages, and when we include smaller and newer traditions, and non-religious worldviews, there is no lack of a field. This in itself is an argument for specialists in studying religions. There are scholars who could be suggested as founders of the discipline as distinct from theology, such as Max Müller or Mircea Eliade, and even, in Britain, Smart himself. There is a concept in Hinduism of the *guru parampara*, somewhat similar to the apostolic succession in Catholicism or the lineages of lamas and teachers in Tibetan or Zen Buddhism. In the field of study of religions, both Brian and Denise would place themselves in the lineage of Smart, though like all pupils moving forward in their own ways. As Brian says, although the approach developed in the 1970s by Ninian Smart has been both critiqued and supplemented, it retains its value (Bocking 2000, 2), at least as a place to start. It certainly has had an important influence in the institutions with which Brian has been associated.

It was mentioned above that on what might be a third criterion of possessing a distinct methodology, study of religions might be on shakier ground. It tends to borrow the methodologies of other disciplines, making theology or sociology or philosophy sound like more solid and prestigious identities. For a decade or two after the setting up of the Lancaster department, phenomenology to some extent functioned as the distinctive methodology of study of religions in schools attempting non-confessional, multi-faith religious education, and in the universities which followed the Lancaster tradition. An "ology" of our own! According to Smart, "Michael Pye used to say that the word phenomenology ... was very, very useful when talking to Vice Chancellors and I'm sure he makes it sound very scientific, technical and esoteric at the same time" (1995, 10). However, in the section of this quotation marked by ellipsis, Smart also says that phenomenology "is a dreadful word of course", and both study of religions and religious education today tend to consider that phenomenology has been superseded by superior approaches. Nevertheless, some aspects of the phenomenological approach to religious studies remain very important. The overall approach of methodological agnosticism, in which the claims of religions are neither endorsed nor refuted, and which steers a course between theology and the reductionism more characteristic of some other disciplines, is a crucial one. As James Cox would argue "there is still a methodological middle ground between theology and culture" (2004, 263). This has nothing to do with personal belief but as Brian suggests is a professional skill (2000, 6) something which the student of religions develops as part of their engagement with

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the religious studies community (another possible criterion for discipline status).

Brian argues that any theoretical framework for studying and understanding religions must avoid explaining away religion in a reductionist manner and, retaining space for the possible truth of the believers' claims and validity of their practices, it should not exclude continued belief and practice (2000, 6). However, in the opinion of the present authors (see Cush and Robinson, 2014) on ethical grounds, including the integrity of the scholar, there may be occasions on which it is the duty of scholars to challenge certain beliefs and practices of some manifestations of some traditions. Historical study may have to challenge some accounts of traditions as not fitting the available evidence, and feminists, for example, may want to denounce certain practices as damaging or evil. As explained by Steven Sutcliffe "subjectivities are to be taken seriously in a reflexively-constructed (as opposed to positivistic) academic study of religion/s, but they are not in themselves sufficient: they require social, cultural and historical contextualisation if adequate analysis is to be achieved" (Sutcliffe 2004a, xxvi).

Another important aspect of Smart's version of phenomenology was the emphasis on empathy, "one should at least use empathy and imagination in trying to enter into the lives of people" (1995, 7), and certainly before proceeding to any judgments. Nevertheless, it should be "informed empathy" (1995, 9). He describes the attitude required as a kind of "warm distance" (1979, 8), which attempts to see what the believer sees, without endorsing or rejecting the believer's standpoint. As with methodological agnosticism, this does not necessarily come naturally, but "it is something to be cultivated" (1995, 9). As Smart summed it up "[t]he study of religions is a science, then, that requires a sensitive and artistic heart" (1971, 13). Taking this attitude seriously is not a passive acceptance of what believers say and do. It remains critical, but also allows the adherent's perspective to challenge our own assumptions. Put well by Whitley, you do not just learn new ideas and practices but "the academic study of religion teaches you that questions exist which you never knew existed" (Whitley, 2015).

The approach to studying religions championed by Smart, and developed by Brian and ourselves may said to be characterized by certain assumptions. With regard to ontology, the assumption is to take a methodologically agnostic stance and leave open questions about the ultimate truth of religious claims, including the debates between realists and non-realists about whether an "ultimate truth" even exists. Smart himself described his position as "soft non-relativism" (1995, 10), but at least one of the present authors would find even that a little too realist.

Where we all agree is in the epistemological assumptions. There may or may not be an ultimate reality, we may or may not be able to access it, but - at least methodologically we should keep open the possibilities. It is not clear whether Brian (2000, 9), Denise (1999, 386) or David Chidester (see Jackson 2004, 181) first coined the phrase "epistemological humility" (though Denise might argue for her use of "epistemologically humble" in Cush 1994, 20) but we all share the approach described, which was implicit in the "soft" part of Smart's "soft non-relativism".

However, study of religions is not simply sitting on the fence. Although we avoid premature evaluation, after gaining informed empathy we still may wish to make critical judgements, speak out or even take action against views and practices we consider dangerous. Thus study of religions is not a value-free zone, but has certain axiological commitments. The values of study of religions may be debated, but might include such things as respect, integrity, equality and open-mindedness.

A further piece of evidence for the study of religions as a separate discipline is the existence of now well-established academic associations and related conferences and journals. The British Association for the Study of Religions - a part of the European Association for the Study of Religion and the International Association for the History of Religion - celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2004. Brian has taken many important roles nationally and internationally in what might be called the religious studies community, including President of the BASR, the Executive Committee of the *IAHR*, and being instrumental in the setting up of the ISASR (Irish Society for the Study of Religions), in 2011. He also initiated the on-line journal (originally "on-disk"), DISKUS, in 1993, which was an innovative contribution to the religious studies community.

Teaching and Learning in Study of Religions

On moving to Bath Spa University in 1986 as a specialist in Japanese religions, Brian found himself in a "teaching-led university" and, in a later reorganisation, situated in an Education Faculty. Commenting on the different institutional cultures of what are now the "old" and "new" universities, Brian identified the importance of teaching and learning in what were founded as colleges and polytechnics, recalling his culture shock on arrival at Bath College of Higher Education from Stirling University (Bocking 1994, 2). His support for experiential learning arose not out of his own experience as a student but when working as an Open University tutor, subsequently reinforced by the already established practice at Bath Spa of sending students on a compulsory fieldwork placement in a religious community (Bocking 1994, 11). The placement in

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a religious community was established in the 1970s by Don Whittle and Heather Williamson, pioneers in so many ways in both teaching and learning in religious studies and religious education in schools. Their successors, including Brian and the current authors, have been persuaded of the invaluable contribution that direct experience of religious communities makes to the student's understanding of religion(s) and have continued this tradition (see www.livingreligion.co.uk).

One way that Brian Bocking explored the nature of the subject and also made the case for experiential learning was by proposing an analogy between teaching languages and teaching religions based on his experience of teaching in both fields, including with East Asian students who took part in the English language and academic support programme of which he was director at Bath Spa University (Bocking 1994, 1). In the course of the argument, he invented "EOL" ("English as Own Language"), and cited EFL (English as a Foreign Language), ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) and EAP (English for Academic Purposes), each of which is accorded a counterpart in the teaching of religions (Bocking 1994, 4). By comparison with EOL, "Religion as Own Language" is the study of a religion with which the student is familiar and in which the lecturer has specialist knowledge (Bocking 1994, 4-5). By comparison with EFL, "Religion as a Foreign Language" is the study of a religion based on a textbook version formulated in concepts and articulated in terms alien to that religion which does not demand that students engage with the religion as it is lived and where the lecturer may lack expertise (Bocking 1994, 5-6). By comparison with ESOL, "Religion for Speakers of Other Languages" is the study of a religion in its vernacular form where students are concerned to acquire context-sensitive, practically oriented information and where lecturers must possess detailed understanding of local norms and values (Bocking 1994, 6-8). Finally, by comparison with EAP, "Religion for Academic Purposes" should go beyond "Religion as a Foreign Language" with its textbook religion since "Religion for Academic Purposes" entails a rounded study of religions encompassing personal encounter with religion and interaction with religious people (Bocking 1994, 9). It should also go beyond "Religion for Speakers of Other Languages" with its vernacular emphasis though this, combined with more general and conceptual aspects, should feature in "Religion for Academic Purposes" (Bocking 1994, 9). The advocacy of experiential learning is further justified when discussing the immersive quality of such learning that engages all the senses and the ability to conduct oneself appropriately and assuredly in diverse settings thereby promoting religious literacy as an intellectual attribute and an interpersonal skill (Bocking 1994, 10-11).

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The comparison with teaching languages has recently come to the fore in this notion of "religious literacy", that the lack of facility in the language of religion, whether ROL, RFL, ReSOL or RAP, means that the standard of public debate about and informed engagement with religious issues and communities is lamentably poor (see Dinham and Francis 2015). This supplies another argument for resourcing a specialist subject dealing with this area in both universities and schools.

Conclusion

Since moving to University College Cork Brian has continued to champion study of religions at university level, teaching and learning in Higher Education, and religious education in schools. In particular he hosted the "RE 21" conference in Cork in 2013, with the intention of stimulating international debate about religious education in schools and facilitating change in Irish schools. Papers from this conference are published in Berglund, Shanneik and Bocking (2015). The unique (in Ireland) undergraduate programme offered at University College Cork *Religions and Global Diversity* certainly prepares students well for teaching a multi-faith and non-confessional religious education, as well as fulfilling requirements for continuing to teacher training. However, although there have been non-denominational examinations since 2000, and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is working on a new curriculum, Education about Religions and Beliefs, progress is slow in an education system still dominated by the Roman Catholic Church (Hyland and Bocking 2015). Nevertheless, thanks to Brian and his colleagues, the seeds have been sown.

According to Grace Davie, religious literacy "is becoming a requirement rather than an option" (2015, xi) and thus it might be concluded that study of religions is important enough to invest in as a specialist subject area in both universities and schools. Although theology may contribute to the improvement of literacy within and about Christianity, enabling students to "learn about Christian reasoning by learning to reason Christianity" (Ford and Higton 2015, 16), only a pluralist, non-confessional but non-reductionist study of religions in both universities and schools can provide the required literacy within a multi-faith, complexly religious and secular world. Brian has made a major contribution to establishing this discipline at both levels of education, for which we are very grateful.

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