**CHAPTER 28**

**RELIGIOUS LITERACY AND PUBLIC AND PROFESSIONAL SETTINGS**

Adam Dinham

**Introduction**

Religious Literacy is a term which has been in use for some years (Wright 2016), though it has been used relatively rarely and vaguely. More recently it has grown in use and popularity, and it has been observed that it has growing traction anywhere that people encounter increasingly plural landscapes of religion and belief (Davie 2015). This makes it an issue for everyone, regardless of personal religion, belief or none. After all, billions of people around the world remain religious, despite the assumptions of secularity, which had expected religion and belief to decline in social significance and eventually to disappear to a vanishing point. Indeed, sociology had predicted exactly this disappearance by the year 2000 (Berger 1967), though this has been challenged and revised since (Berger 1999). Eighty-four per cent of the global population reports a religious affiliation Pew Research Center (2012). Millions of these religious people are in Britain, Europe and the West. Globalisation and migration put us all in to daily encounter with all this. But the crisis is that, after decades in which we have barely talked about religion and belief, society has largely lost the ability to do so now. In many cases, it has largely lost the understanding of why it might be legitimate and pressing to do so in the first place.

*Religious literacy in health and social care*

It has been argued that this is urgent and pressing in every public setting (Dinham and Francis 2015). This chapter explores ways in which it might have a particular significance within health and social care. This appears to be one of the most populated front lines for religious literacy, where public professionals meet the greatest number and growing diversity of spiritual beliefs and needs. For example, in England there are 13.9 million users of emergency rooms and 70,000 children in care each year. Furthermore, 25 per cent of English adults have a mental illness (UK Government 2014).

It is also the case that health and social care professions frequently claim to embody a systemic understanding of the person as physical, mental, social *and spiritual,* and in England and Wales, for example, have recentlyre-emphasised the importance of practitioners considering their work as *care* in a context of *compassion* (Cummings and Bennett 2012). At the same time, many health and social care providers and educators employ chaplaincies as a resource for all, and in some cases these are legally mandated (for example, in UK hospitals). Yet curricula for training and education of health and social care professionals appear largely to neglect religion and belief, and the resources (such as chaplaincies) associated with them, reflecting instead a wider secularised sensibility in higher education which over-emphasises natural scientific paradigms and epistemologies at the expense of the wisdoms of care which reside in traditions of spirituality, religion and belief (Dinham and Jones 2010). Within this, health and social care education tends especially towards medical model and social scientific accounts of the person which can obscure the spiritual (Furness and Gilligan 2014).

At the same time, because health and social care is a public issue, these settings find themselves on a frontline with public policy-making too, which is itself heavily inflected with secular assumptions which militate against engagement with the issue of religiously literate practices of health and social care (Dinham and Francis 2015). Yet, while a range of policy documents, regulations, benchmarks and professional guidelines hint at a role for spirituality in health and social care, referring to ‘well-being’ and the ‘holistic person’. However, these references tend to be minimal, largely undefined and non-operationalised as for example, the so-called ‘health and wellbeing boards’ established by the UK Health and Social Care Act 2012.

Thus, research on religion in nursing education is limited to a focus on encouraging spiritual sensitivity (Catanzaro and McMullen 2001). The limited research on the relationship between religion and counselling and psychotherapy education has tended to focus on attitudes and capabilities of practitioners (Carlson et al. 2002; Walker et al. 2004). While the role of religion in social work education is slightly better established, this research has tended to focus the attitudes of staff (Sheridan et al. 1994) or students (Sheridan and Amato-von Hemert 1999) as to whether or not religion or spirituality should be involved in social work education. Where work has focused on the need for better teaching on the connections between religion and social work (Gilligan and Furness 2006; Russel 1998), there is a neglect of the diverse belief and practice context in which practitioners will work, and little is offered by way of exactly what kinds of knowledge are required, and for which contexts.

With researchers tending to use the term ‘spirituality’ as a proxy for religion and belief, a clear link has been established between spirituality and mortality, coping and recovery (Puchalski 2001; Yates et al 1981); counselling and psychotherapy (Powell and Cook 2006); and social care needs (Gilligan and Furness 2006; Pentaris 2012). Yet the implications of this link for practitioners are extremely demanding in the context of the radically and increasingly diverse array of religious and nonreligious beliefs and practices found in the UK. It also elides the distinctions between spirituality, religion and belief, which have overlaps but are not the same things. The use of proxies may itself be indicative of the religious literacy problem, reflecting the inability to talk well about religion and belief which is identified as a core starting point of the problem. In any case, there is no evidence of how this manifests, if at all, in lecture halls in professional training, and students’ opportunity for formation in this area is largely unknown.

This adds up to a health and social care environment of intense religious diversity alongside an emphasis on the restoration of compassion and care, and little or no capacity or language for connecting or engaging them. Very little is understood about the role, legitimacy, impacts and meanings of religion and belief in public and professional life in general, and in health and social care in particular. In this context, the question of how to prepare practitioners to engage with the real religious landscape becomes fundamental to providing holistic and effective care.

*The religious literacy problem*

At the root of the religious literacy critique is the observation that there is a lamentable quality of conversation about religion and belief, just as we need it most (Davie 2015). There are similarities with the state of public discourse on race in the 1960s and gender in the 1970s—that is to say, with *some* prominent voices, and *large* numbers of stakeholders, but a generally unformed popular way of talking about it. In the cases of race and gender, many people thought that because people were not talking well about being black or being a woman, there was not really a problem. This applied (and in many cases continues to apply) to same sex relationships too. As Furness and Gilligan (2014) suggest, for a long time this has also been the case on religion or belief. We have tended to end up hearing about them only when things go wrong. Developing a discourse for everyone seems like a pressing task, therefore, and it needs to be both thoughtful and theorised on the one hand, and publicly accessible and practical on the other.

As I have observed elsewhere, the conversation has revolved around four key elements which make religious literacy widely relevant and pressing (Dinham 2015a). First there is diversity, which is a matter of cohesion. Second is globalisation, which is a matter of the export and import of trade and culture. Third is equality, which is a matter of good employee practice and service user experience. Fourth is extremism, which is a matter of security. This is a lot for religious literacy to be handling, and part of success is knowing which you are handling, when. It cannot all be done at once, in one place, with one purpose. It is context-specific. And as the concept of religious literacy grows in usage and popularity, it is also increasingly contested.

Part of this contested nature lies in differing ideas of its purpose. Versions include better *faith to faith* engagement (Barnes and Smith 2015), *biblical* literacy in various forms, especially in the US (Prothero 2007)—about regaining a sense of a Christian West in the context of growing plurality—a strand which is committed to peace-building (Moore 2015), and versions which are interested in the relationships between religion and *non-religious* people (Dinham and Francis 2015). It is also important to pay attention to the interface between *spaces* which are religious and those which are not—and especially of workplaces and other everyday shared spaces, like medical settings, and social, cultural and educational institutions.

Another part of the contest is who needs to be *doing* religious literacy—both the talking, and the listening. A tempting answer for many in the West has been that it is best done in some kind of secular way, which reflects a wider idea that secularity somehow equals *neutrality*, and that this is an essential condition for the impartial inclusion of all. But nobody starts from nowhere and there is no such thing as neutrality. The secular is a normative notion, and is as much misunderstood as religion itself. *Secular* literacy is an inescapable part of religious literacy because secularity is the assumed context of religiousness. Religious literacy requires clarity about what both concepts could mean. Thus, Wilson’s (1966) proposal that religion is losing its social significance, is taken on by Berger’s (1967) suggestion that religion will disappear to a vanishing point. Davie (1994) counters with the observation that people are believing without belonging and Hervieu-Leger (2000) inverts this to add that people are also belonging without believing. Woodhead (2012) concludes that while traditional religion may be in decline, new spiritual and informal forms are thriving. Bruce (2013) dismisses this, saying that all this religion talk is nothing but a last gasp before it finally disappears, as originally predicted.

**The Religious Literacy Programme**

In my conception of it, the religious literacy idea has evolved out of the Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education Programme [RLLPHE], a programme established in 2009, which has since worked with more than 600 participants across 130 universities[[1]](#footnote-1). This came initially out of anxiety about extremism on university campuses. I started by challenging the focus on the issue of extremism itself. I argued that no approach to religious literacy will start well from there. It was also important to point out that extremism, on campuses and elsewhere, is not only rare but also difficult to define and judge. Universities are supposed to be places for the exploration of difficult ideas, including radical ones. Where one draws the line is an obvious and highly fraught question. I argued that it would be much more effective and realistic to set religion and belief in their proper context as normal, mainstream and widespread. Universities were a good place to start because, as these assumptions are produced and reproduced in university settings, they are presumed to become part of the formation of minds which underpins the public conversation in wider society.

We carried out semi-structured interviews with 21 Vice Chancellors and/or their deputies and determined what sort of stances they thought their universities take in relation to religion and belief. We also asked what concerns them in relation to religion and belief.

In relation to the first, we identified four university stances, or ‘types’, which appear to be translatable in to a range of other sectors and settings across wider society (Dinham and Jones 2012). In the first type, the university is conceived of as a secular space where public institutions remain as far as possible neutral and education avoids mentioning religions or belief. We called this group ‘soft neutral’. A similar but firmer line actively we identified seeks the protection of public space from religious faith, asserting a duty to preserve public bodies, such as universities, as secular. We called this group ‘hard neutral’. Others saw religious faith as a source of learning and formation and a larger number of the VCs we spoke to took this view, with many stressing that their campus is friendly to religions and religious people, and comfortable with religious diversity. We called this group ‘Repositories and Resources’. The fourth approach we identified aims to offer education ‘for the whole person’, incorporating including religious or belief dimensions. This perspective was more common in universities which were founded as religious institutions and we called this group ‘Formative-Collegial’.

The second issue we asked about was what sorts of matters about religion preoccupy Vice Chancellors and other university leaders. Here we found that practical and policy concerns inflected the debate. Vice Chancellors were concerned about issues in four key areas. First, they were focused on legal action arising out of possible discrimination on the grounds of religion and belief; second, about campus extremism and violence; third, about being able to market their universities to students of all religion and belief backgrounds and none; and fourth, especially about appealing to international students, including those from all parts of the world, and from all religion and belief traditions, identities and backgrounds. These were very concrete and practical concerns, and could be primarily characterised in terms of anxieties detectable in wider society, about being sued and being bombed. On the other hand they were interested in the potential opportunities, as well as the risks, (in terms of ‘widening participation’ and attracting international students). This too reflects an interest in faith groups in wider society for what they can bring to the table, in welfare and in the UK, in the provision of schools particularly.

We also conducted case study research in three universities to understand the narratives of religious faith as they are experienced by students and staff. This enabled us to dig down in to the many practical ways in which faith plays out in universities much more widely (Dinham and Jones 2012). We found students who had not felt able to attend for interviews, or for exams, or for Saturday lectures because of clashes with religious events. There were anxieties about public speakers and what to ‘allow’ them to say on topics like Israel and Zionism. Timetabling staff were worried about how to handle the exam periods for the years after 2014 when Ramadan coincides with it. Canteens and bars were taking all sorts of stands for or against halal food, alcohol-free events, and single-sex socials, and there were bitter rumours in one institution that the Muslims were receiving subsidised lunches. There were sports societies whose members were ribbing a Sikh for wearing the 5 K’s (worn by orthodox Sikhs: kesh—uncut hair; kara—armband; kangha—comb; kacchera—knee length shorts; and kirpan—sword). Residences were struggling with kosher kitchens and women-only halls. Campus banks either could or could not handle the requests of Muslim students for halal borrowing for student fees while counselling services felt they could not discuss religion with religious students.

The theoretical and empirical work would never be useful if it was not also linked to action, and the programme had an action orientation built in from the outset. The intention was to translate what we found theoretically and empirically in to training, and this was developed in a wide range of areas. We devised training workshops for Vice Chancellors and their senior delegates, designed to draw their attention to the critique and analysis we have undertaken and to stimulate university leaderships to consider their own stances and how these affected the tone and practice of their institutions. We also delivered training workshops to upwards of 600 HE staff—academic and administrative—from more than 100 universities. exploring the analyses and stances evolved from the leadership work, but also working to induce bottom-up solutions to concrete dilemmas in student services, timetabling, accommodation, food and alcohol, dress and etiquette, and a whole range of practical issues and settings. This included our devising specialist workshops on religion and belief law, and in conflict resolution, in partnership with expert bodies in these areas.

**A religious literacy framework**

The experience of this process of thinking, researching, training and reflecting has led to the development of a religious literacy framework which is intended as a way of thinking about religion and belief, not only in university spaces, but across wider society too. It is presented as a journey in four parts—categorisation, disposition, knowledge, and skills.

This begins with conceptualising religion and belief and why they matter (Dinham and Jones 2012). This stage is called ‘*Categorisation*’. It asks ‘what do we mean by religion and how can we think about it?’ There is limited understanding of how much religion and belief have changed over the past century. The dominance of the idea of secularity in sociology as the primary lens through which to understand religion has translated in to its social dominance more broadly. So understanding the real religious landscape, and the idea of the secular which frames it, is just as important as understanding the religion and belief within it. While we know that the religious and the secular are hugely debatable categories, the trends are clear enough, pointing to how religious forms have been changing in this period, as well as the religious mix and the mix of religion and non-religion. To do religion justice therefore, religious literacy requires a stretchy understanding of religion to include religious traditions, including Baha’i, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Sikhism and Zoroastrianism; informal, non-traditional religion, to do with nature, goddesses, angels and afterlife; non-religion, like secularism, atheism and humanism; and non-religious beliefs, like environmentalism and veganism. At the same time it demands an understanding that European societies continue to be secular but also Christian and plural, and that moreover, all of these things are happening together. Knowing which religion and beliefs we think count, what we mean by secular, and what purpose we are pursuing—security, cohesion, or something else—is key.

The second phase is ‘*Disposition*’. This asks ‘what emotional and atavistic assumptions are brought to the conversation and what are the affects of people’s own emotional positions in relation to religion or belief?’ Like politics, almost everybody feels they know something about religion and belief, and often this is experienced highly personally. This emotional dimension is important not least because religion or belief deal in things that deeply matter, like values, life, death and sex. It is also important because there may be significant gaps between what people feel, what they think, and what they know in relation to religion and belief, and this can hinder religious literacy when ideas and emotions unintentionally conflate. Indeed, not addressing our feelings about religion or belief is likely to be part of why the conversation is often ill-informed and grumpy – obsessed with the ways in which religion and belief clash, or oppress people. People feel strongly. What we tend to end up with is a muddled conversation, often mired in anxiety about violence and sex, and leading to knee jerk reactions. Controversies abound, often about same sex marriage and violence. Media reflects and sometimes inflates them. Such muddles demand that we get to grips with religion as it is lived in the public sphere. Moving from the sub-textual and emotional – the largely untested assumptions and emotions which underpin so much experience – to the expressly understood will be crucial if citizens and students are to engage thoughtfully with the religion and belief they encounter.

Third, religious literacy is rooted in *Knowledge*. But not comprehensive knowledge—that is obviously impossible. The Religious Literacy Programme talks about ‘a degree of general knowledge about at least some religious traditions and beliefs’ and the confidence to find out about others. The knowledge that is needed is about the shape of religion and belief where you find yourself. This is referred to as ‘the real religious landscape’ (Dinham and Shaw 2015), and it obviously varies from place to place and time to time. So an engagement with religion and belief as identity, rather than tradition, is required, which releases us from the notion that we can and ought to learn the A-Z of a *tradition*, as though this is always the same, everywhere, in every person. Rather, it is about recognising that the same religions and beliefs are different in differently lived by different people in different places. Sometimes they differ within the same person, from one day to the next.

This leads directly to the fourth and final aspect of religious literacy, which is *Skills*. This is where clarity about religion and belief as category, along with an open disposition, and *some* knowledge of *some* religion practices and beliefs, translates in to what *do* in practice, especially in public and work places. The Religious Literacy Programme usually does this in two stages: first, by auditing the challenges and needs, sometimes through a highly formal research process; at others through something lighter touch, depending on the time and resources available to the setting. Second, those findings are translated in to training which fits, often through facilitated co-production with people in those settings. This recognises that religions and beliefs cannot be understood as monolithic blocks of unchanging tradition, the same for everyone, but are lived, contingent and fluid. Responses must fit needs and opportunities where they are made.

**Conclusion**

This approach makes religious literacy a framework, not a recipe. You cannot say ‘do this’ and religious literacy will result. It has different purposes, contents and outcomes in different settings. In relation to training for the public professions, students have come almost entirely to lack a framework for thinking or engaging well with religion and belief, yet globalisation, migration, equality and human rights discourses put them in to daily encounter with the greatest religion and belief diversity in history. Challenging the post-religious and secular assumptions which characterise universities in general, and health and social care training in particular, will be key to unlocking the conversation. Discovering the challenges, needs and opportunities is a pressing task for research. Responding in ways which do not collapse in to more comfortable proxies, like spirituality, is crucial if we are to socialise professionals and citizens in the distinctions as well as the overlaps between religious and other aspects of identity.

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