

DELANTY AND CONTEMPORARY BRITISH RELIGIOUS EDUCATION[†]

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Abstract

Gerard Delanty is a social theorist who believes that cosmopolitan theory has a critical dimension, which facilitates debate about the challenges of globalization and intercultural communication. He includes in this theory non-Western expressions of cosmopolitanism, while concentrating, in the extracts quoted here, on its expressions in Europe. Globalization has already brought about an enormous transformation of social relationships and influences virtually the entire span of human experience (Delanty 2009, 1). In the light of this transformation, this article engages with contemporary British Religious Education's relationship both with 'other faiths' and with the state. It argues that in Delanty's theory may lie one possible, positive, way forward in the ongoing necessity for re-negotiation, within the maintained sector, of a truly 'plural' identity for religious education.

Introduction

Liberal multiculturalism has been the background to religious education in Britain since the late 1970's. How successful that alliance has been may yet remain to be seen (Barnes 2009). But in the RE community itself there is widespread unease about the alliance between religious education and simplistic 'social cohesion' agendas (REC R.E. Review 2012: para. 1;7, 1;9, 1;14, 2;1 2;7) which appear, from the point of view of the State, to be enough to validate religious education, whilst also excluding real debate about the 'truth claims' on which it is based. Holding that debate together, non-violently (Sen 2006, p. xiii), has also been complicated by instances of radicalism, which make it clear that the liberal state cannot coexist, publically, with *all* religious claims. Together, these factors have problematised liberal multiculturalism itself and with it, put debate about contemporary British religious education into new territory. Delanty's way of looking at how religion itself fits into public debate is a refreshing alternative to the idea that the only way religion can function in the 'secular' state is by being privatised (Starr 1988), and as such seems to be a set of ideas well worth exploring.

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Delanty's book, *The Cosmopolitan Imagination* (2009), imagines modern European society as being 'culture in transition.' It is not entirely secularised—as some would imagine or like it to be—and at the same time it is differently constituted, in respect of religion, across Europe, by virtue of those states' very individual historical development. Delanty considers, therefore, that the time and space for liberal multiculturalism in its previous forms to flourish may now have gone—but suggests, in its place, not the exclusion of religion from the public sphere, but its inclusion based on very particular set terms. Those terms—and that debate—are outlined below.

Beyond liberal multiculturalism?

One of the reasons that there is at present a debate about liberal multiculturalism is that liberal multiculturalism itself (Delanty 2009, 141) emerged on the basis of conditions which no longer exist, reliably, in Western societies. The first of these is, of course, economic and social stability. As Delanty points out (and you only have to glance at a newspaper in October 2012 to see the daily effect in Italy, Greece and Spain), 'In many of these countries today instability has become a reality that has undermined the prospects of multiculturalism.' (2009, 141)

Liberal multiculturalism, Delanty says, was the product of societies which did not experience major questioning of their national identities and was based on the liberal principle of tolerance rather than in the extension of citizenship. It was constructed on the assumption that there was a dominant cultural identity to which the incoming groups had to adjust but to whom certain concessions could be made (Delanty 2009, 141). So the emergence of secularism itself did not eradicate religion from society. Instead it granted it a particular place and set conditions to its existence in the public domain (Delanty 2009, 164). What religion cannot do is position itself as an entirely 'other' entity in society, subject to none of that society's open contestation of values.

Culture, on this reading, is seen not as static entity but as 'a developmental process entailing self-problematization and the discursive examination of all claims' (Delanty 2009, 172). Cosmopolitanism can embrace this kind of view of religion's place in society precisely because its view of culture differs from that constructed by liberal multiculturalism. Cosmopolitanism is a form of 'cultural transition in which new horizons open up in the creative dialogue of cultures.' He therefore sees cultures (and the traditions within them), as a learning process. If part of that learning concerns re-negotiation of the place of public religious expressions, that should be seen as both appropriate and necessary.

Religion and religious education as 'an on-going site of contestation'

The cosmopolitan society can potentially, he argues, promote openness and public contestation without being simply about either just 'liberal tolerance' or 'the communitarian pursuit of diversity' (Delanty 2009, 145). As a result, just as the private citizen's own 'cosmopolitan imagination' can strive to understand, as an individual, privately, what is happening in this cultural transition of so called late modernity so, too, public culture, including schooling, can strive to understand why

the position of faith in schooling has become—and will remain—‘an on-going site of contestation’ (Delanty 2009, 173).

Religion *has* a place in any European society. It is part of public culture. And public culture under Delanty’s ‘cosmopolitan’ definition must be able to address all kinds of cultural challenges (Benhabib 2002; Gutmann 2003). It cannot therefore just seek to exclude religion from the public sphere (Delanty 2009, 175). But in turn neither can religion claim exemption from engagement in the dialogue arising from its existence within that ‘on-going site of contestation’ (Delanty 2009, 173). The condition for the entry of religion into the public sphere must be its willingness to engage in public discourse (Habermas 2005, 2006).

Since cosmopolitanism is itself a form of cultural transition, in which new horizons open in the ‘creative dialogue of cultures’ the process by which the state–schooling debate takes place in this engagement must inevitably lead to a re-negotiation of both the state’s and religions’ own identities.

But the good news is that religion, being seen as ‘an on-going site of contestation’ is, for Delanty, a positive thing. He does not assume, as Giddens, Baumann, Beck and others might (Beck, and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Giddens 1991), that all forms of religion have had their day. But neither does he attempt to preserve a religious status quo against a perceived ‘collapse of moral values’. Comments like the one below which came from Archbishop Carey, in the 1990’s, would need, in the cosmopolitan society, to be seen, as they generally are in Britain today, as needing to be submitted, themselves, to scrutiny, not accepted as *de facto* ‘true’ just because they come from an authoritative source within the state’s constitutionally constituted church. This submission leads to scrutiny and from this scrutiny comes debate—and from debate, held publically, comes a discourse, which, eventually, leads to re-negotiation. None of the parties involved in that re-negotiation can remain completely unaltered, though—and they certainly can’t assume that their own definitions of terms like relativism, culture or even morality will be publically accepted by all. The definitions, however, are being scrutinised in order to facilitate what Carey calls, here ‘a more truthful and more constructive way of describing the things that bind us together.’ As such, the re-negotiation is relevant to all.

I believe that the fight back against moral and cultural relativism is under way. There is now a reaction against moral relativism, a growing mood in favour of a more truthful and more constructive way of describing the things that bind us together (George Carey in Beck 1998, 39).

Delanty suggests that self problematization and open contestation will inevitably provide the conditions under which public re-negotiation of the state–faith relationship itself can happen. Instead, then, of defensively reacting to religion or, indeed, just wishing it would go away, states should come, eventually, to move on together, through a *better negotiated set of identities* than that produced by multicultural liberalism. Without engagement with that task, however, cosmopolitanism, which is itself ‘a form of cultural transition’ might not always be able to envision *any* kind of creative dialogue with faith, and could then legitimately decide not to allow religion to position itself, or R.E., in the public sphere at all.

Delanty illustrates the idea of negotiated identities, in respect of religion, from the peace process that arose out of the Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland,

citing the way that fixed identities rooted in ancient religious tradition were dissolved by it and negotiated identities cultivated by it. European and other secularism, which worries our churches and other faith communities so much, is for Delanty, a place which does not want to deny faith a place, in schooling or anywhere else, but wants and *has* to, set effective boundaries for the coexistence of its various cultures (Delanty 2009, 164). In this ‘on-going site of contestation’ all parties will inevitably have to, even if they don’t want to, cultivate *differently* negotiated identities. Admittedly this idea will ring large alarm bells for some members of some faith communities, but there can be few of us involved with interfaith dialogue who haven’t already long noticed the ‘reflexivity’ (Archer 2012) with which the young adapt practices held dear to their elders, so that they can ‘hold on’ to both the traditions they come from and the culture in which they live. Hip hop Islam is one such case. Sikh adaptation of Khalsa rules to meet British health and safety at work rules is another. Benhabib points out how learning processes do, however, need to be two way to be effective. Citing the French ‘scarf affair’ she describes French society as needing to learn not to stigmatize and stereotype as ‘backward and oppressed creatures’ all those who wear ‘what appears to be a religiously mandated piece of clothing.’ But she also comments that the girls themselves must learn to give a justification of their actions with ‘good reasons in the public sphere’ (Benhabib 2002, 118).

Why should religions ‘self problematize’?

Religions, we have to admit, are not all sweetness and light. They can and sometimes do offer cultural challenges to the state. Some forms of cultural challenge are clearly beyond the limits of what Delanty (and all of us, I assume) would consider it sensible to allow free rein in any society. The public good, according to Delanty, as to Rawls, must therefore have some say in the faith–coexistence debate. Having some awareness of how religions have evolved, historically in Europe, to produce the particular church–state relationships we now have, might also be of value.

Historically, Delanty points out, that there is a long tradition of the principle of ‘*cuius regio, eius religio*’, being active in European debate about religion’s place in the public sphere. In 1648 the Treaty of Westphalia established this principle of (roughly) ‘he who rules, can choose the state’s religion’ —and that principle has laid the foundations for *both* the different forms of secularizations we see emerging in Europe—and, by extension, for all the various forms of state–faith relationship and state/faith/schooling relationship which have since emerged, too. These two forms he describes as republicanism and conservative constitutionalism.

European states have recognised both republicanism and/or conservative constitutionalism for over 300 years. And in the on-going public contestation between all forms of culture within those states we see the emergence of very different attitudes to faith in schooling. In the French model there is now a decision to remove faith from schooling. In Britain there is a fundamental re-negotiation going on which might result in practically anything! In Britain, distinctively, too, the ‘constitutional conservative position’ grants one form of religion (the Church of England) constitutional protection over the others. That in itself has resulted in a different set of negotiated identities for faith schooling than those existing anywhere else in Europe or possibly, the world (Delanty 2009, 173, 176). The R.E. curriculum, too,

establishes its curriculum content as 'in the main Christian' (Endnote 1). Re-negotiation of this set of identities may or may not be imminent, but it is, for Delanty, in one way or another, inevitable. One more factor needs to be taken into account in this re-negotiation. It has to be open—and 'at least reasonable.' As Margaret Archer points out:

If in this enterprise (talking about God) we seek to make faith into blind faith, as some religious people do, that is not intellectually acceptable. It is not intellectually appropriate to privilege any belief—not even a religious belief—in such a way that it becomes immune to judgmental rationality. (Archer et al. 2004)

Of course this stipulation might, effectively, remove some forms of religion from the public sphere. But it might also make it clearer to all those involved in the debate what the boundaries of multiculturalism have to be today, if we are, actively, genuinely, to be a plural society, with plural identities (Sen 2006; Law 2006)—and non-violent.

Taking the British case for religious education into reflexive modernity (Archer 2012)

Current debate about faith in schooling often seems, to me, to be too insular. That is partly because British schooling has been singular in its development from a particular state–faith relationship, but also because patterns of migration etc. have been so strongly—and positively—affected by the existence of the Commonwealth. But now, it seems, new conditions are emerging in which the debate about faith and schooling is up for public contestation yet again. Will Charles' option to be 'Defender of Faith' when and if he becomes King affect the state's special relationship with the Church of England? Would R.E. then become more specifically pluralistic in curriculum content—or would it disappear altogether from the maintained sector of schooling?

Re-negotiation of religious education's identity needs, now, to take place in the light of the developments which social theorists call 'global modernity' (Giddens 1994; Beck, and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) and 'reflexivity' (Archer et al. 2004). Without that paradigmatic shift we will simply badly repair or re-name an R.E. which is basically very local and traditional, rather than seize the opportunity to move towards a more truly 'plural' religious education. This shift might also help establish, once and for all, too, the principle that religious education, in the state sector at least, should be there not as another way of nurturing young people, exclusively, into privatised belief systems, but as a way of facilitating, inclusively, public, open, study of 'what a religion is and what it would mean to take a religion seriously' (Holm 1975, 1).

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Policy documents

- Education Reform Act 1988*, para. 8.3.
- Religious Education Council of England and Wales (12 November, 2012). *Subject Review of Religious Education in England*, Phase 1, Report of the Expert Panel. Draft Report for Consultation Only.

Endnote 1

The specific wording used in the *Education Reform Act 1988* is as follows:

Agreed Syllabuses for Religious Education should "reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain." (Para. 8.3).