

Paul Hirst and religious education's curriculum question: or how Hirst never thought religion was a form of knowledge at all

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ABSTRACT

Hirst consistently listed religion as a form of knowledge. He had numerous chances to revise this position, but did not. However, whenever Hirst actually considered religion and the curriculum in specific detail, either he did so without reference to the curriculum principles of liberal education, or he implicitly or explicitly *rejected* his own claim that religion was a form of knowledge. In this article I hope to contribute to an appreciation of Hirst's work by showing how attempting to understand his thinking on religious education against the background of forms of knowledge both adds to confusion about what Hirst intended the forms of knowledge to be, and hinders an understanding of what his explicitly stated curriculum position on religion actually was. I speculate that Hirst included religion as a form of knowledge only as an 'agnostic placeholder' acknowledging the *possibility* that religion might *turn out* to be a form of knowledge. I then offer a brief assessment of this revised interpretation of Hirst's position from the perspective of contemporary scholarship in the philosophy of religious education.

KEYWORDS: religious education, curriculum, Paul Hirst, forms of knowledge, religion and education

It is generally known that Hirst departed in later life from the 'forms of knowledge' as a philosophical basis for curriculum planning (see [Hirst 1999](#)). Nevertheless, scholarship on Hirst's contribution to the philosophy of religious education tends to begin with the 'forms of knowledge', on the grounds that that is where Hirst began. So Hirst's significant attention to religious education—in the ten or so years since the publication in 1965 of 'Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge'—must be reconciled with the foundational thesis for 'total' curriculum

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planning that he developed during this time. That such a reconciliation is difficult has been recognized by the various scholars who have attempted it (for an example of an extended consideration, see [Hand 2006](#)). Brian Crittenden (1993: 130) notes a general ‘uncertainty’ in Hirst’s initial characterization of religion as a form of knowledge, followed by a ‘hesitant’ tone in his later discussion (p. 131). He notes of Hirst’s earlier work that ‘Given Hirst’s reservations about religious beliefs as knowledge ... it is not then clear why he included (and continued to include) religion in his canon of fields of knowledge’ (p. 133) and observes that after Hirst’s exchange with D. Z. Phillips, where he appears to *reject* treating religion as a form of knowledge in school, ‘the continued inclusion of religion in Hirst’s list of forms of knowledge seems unjustified’ (p. 134).

I wish to go a little further than Crittenden, and suggest that there is little evidence that Hirst ever seriously tried to advocate religion as a form of knowledge at all. Hirst consistently listed religion as a form of knowledge. He had numerous chances to revise this position but did not, and even when he embarked on his ‘practice turn’, he defended the forms as logical categories, although he rejected them as a basis for curriculum planning. However, I argue that whenever Hirst actually considered religion and the curriculum in specific detail, he did so either without reference to the curriculum principles of liberal education, or else implicitly or explicitly *rejected* his claim that religion was a form of knowledge. While I suggest in this article some possible reasons why Hirst might have maintained this inconsistent position, they will have to remain in the realms of historical speculation. I hope, however, to contribute to an appreciation of Hirst’s work by showing how attempting to understand his thinking on religious education during this period against the background of forms of knowledge both adds to confusion about what Hirst intended the forms of knowledge to be, and hinders an understanding of what his explicitly stated curriculum position on religion actually was. I then offer an assessment of that newly stated position from the perspective of contemporary scholarship on the philosophy of religious education.

In attempting to reconstruct Hirst’s position, I cover somewhat familiar ground in a slightly new way. Traditionally, the first phase of Hirst’s thinking on religion and education is identified in two of his earliest publications, ‘Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge’ (1965a) and ‘Morals, Religion and the Maintained School’ (1965b), both published in 1965. Hereafter I shall refer to these two papers as ‘Liberal Education’ and ‘Morals, Religion’.¹ The second phase is represented in the books *Knowledge and the Curriculum* (1974a) and *Moral Education in a Secular Society* (1974b), both published in 1974, in which Hirst explicitly *restates* his position on religion and education. It is generally considered that Hirst had an opportunity to sharpen his thinking on religion as a form of knowledge through his ongoing engagement with R. S. Peters—particularly their collaboration on *The Logic of Education* (1970)—and through some published exchanges on each of his 1965 papers; he draws attention in his 1974 restatement specifically to engagements

¹ Additionally, my citations are from their republication in *Knowledge and the Curriculum* (Hirst 1974a).

with D. Z. Phillips ([Hirst 1970](#); [Phillips 1970](#)) and R. Shone ([Shone 1973](#); [Hirst 1973b](#)). Then there is to be considered Hirst's later turn to curriculum aims expressed in relation to 'practices' rather than forms of knowledge ([1993](#), [1999](#)), in which he makes some explicit reference to religion, but does not unpack this in detail. This period of Hirst's writing is fascinating as he reflects on the development of his philosophical career in relation to his own fundamentalist Christian upbringing ([2008](#), [2010](#)).

I should point out that Hirst is throughout concerned with three distinct (albeit closely related) philosophical questions about religion and education: the contribution of religious education to moral formation; the nature and legitimacy of religious schooling; and the place (if any) of religion within a total curriculum plan for the state maintained school. My concern is primarily with the third of these questions, and my approach is original in that I do not see the two 1965 articles as part of a unified approach. I view each as representing from the outset two distinct approaches to religious education's curriculum question that Hirst never even implicitly attempts to reconcile.

A 'TOTAL' APPROACH TO CURRICULUM

Hirst's position on liberal education has attracted considerable criticism and Hirst himself later moved away from it. John White, writing on religious education, expresses the state of affairs with considerable finality:

Good reasons have to be given why the pursuit of truth (in its different forms) for its own sake should be a key aim of education—as distinct from, for instance, equipping children to lead flourishing lives or become responsible citizens. The 'transcendental' arguments which Peters and Hirst both relied on to reach the same conclusion have long ago been shown to be inadequate; and no arguments for it which are more reliable have since come my way. ([White 2010](#): 22–3)

Nevertheless, the considerable influence and formidable impact of Hirst's work has been his exposition—in that defining phase in the early history of analytic philosophy of education—of the extent to which philosophy could support 'rational curriculum planning', within which he intended to raise questions at a range of levels of curriculum design, especially at the top level: the planning of a 'total' curriculum ([Hirst 1974a](#): 11, 134). Before deciding on curriculum content (and that includes which subjects, disciplines, fields or integrated themes should make up the whole academic experience of a child), we ought to get straight 'the objectives of the enterprise' (p. 11), and although philosophy itself may not be the source of such objectives, it can offer services of conceptual clarification to discussions about what these objectives should be. Hirst is at pains to acknowledge that philosophy is only one contributing factor to the planning of a rational curriculum, but that nevertheless 'Philosophical claims can at times provide powerful arguments in curriculum planning. And whether we like it or not our planning reflects certain philosophical beliefs. The question is simply how justifiable these are' (p. 29).

Hirst accepts the 'non-ideal' situation to which a philosopher of curriculum must contribute when he writes that 'we cannot start from scratch, not only because that

is practically impossible in our society, but also because ... we do not have the intellectual mastery it presupposes' (p. 11). Hirst continues that what we must therefore do

is to make our curriculum planning progressively more rational by 'piecemeal engineering'. It is by the perpetual rational questioning and criticism of what we now do, that better practice can be achieved. The challenge to formulate the objectives of our present enterprises and to justify both these and the means we use to pursue them is the way to progress. (Hirst 1974a: 11)

What Hirst is implying by a lack of ‘intellectual mastery’ is undeveloped in this 1974 statement of his perspective on curriculum planning. Also rather tantalizing—because it appears to anticipate elements of his later turn to ‘practices’ rather than theoretical knowledge as a basis for curriculum planning—is the claim that ‘new objectives and means arise primarily within the context of present practices and cannot be imaginatively constructed outside these’ (p. 11). What point Hirst might be making in his concession of the need for a ‘piecemeal’ approach is important for the argument I advance in this article. Although a philosopher is unlikely to have the opportunity or practical influence *actually* to create a total school curriculum from scratch, the impression given in ‘Liberal Education’ (1965a) and Hirst’s further consideration of the forms of knowledge in *Knowledge and the Curriculum* (1974a)—as I will go on to elaborate—is that, in ‘logical’ if not practical terms, this is indeed what Hirst is attempting.

Perhaps by a piecemeal formulation of the objectives of our 'present enterprises', Hirst means that we begin more locally, proceeding subject by subject. So concerning religious education specifically, we might ask for a justification of whatever role we think religion should play in the curriculum and, secondarily, whether it should be a discrete subject: whether indeed it should have any presence at all, or whether treatment of religion should be restricted to taking only certain forms. It is hard to imagine how justifications of even these 'piecemeal' considerations could be offered without reference to some more fundamental account of the aims of curriculum and its most basic objectives. Furthermore, writing alongside R. S. Peters, Hirst warns us that we should be wary of accepting any particular curriculum unit as a given starting point for curriculum planning, since 'curriculum units, whatever their character may be, subject, topic, project or some other, must be seen as units constructed simply for educational purposes. They have no ultimate value outside this context' (Hirst and Peters 1970: 69).

Being driven by practical concerns to adopt a ‘piecemeal’ approach might also mean (in relation to religious education at least) that regardless of the philosophical basis we might claim for curriculum, we should start from the constraints that actually obtain—i.e. that we are required by law to offer some form of religious education—and plan from there. Although it hardly seems consistent with the enterprise of liberal education and the forms of knowledge, and although I will have to leave this claim hanging for the moment, it seems to me that this is largely what Hirst actually does in relation to religious education.

Hirst's overall project—to offer a rational justification, in relation to carefully identified objectives, for the presence of any given 'curriculum unit'—is so formidably appealing precisely in light of the practical barriers to 'imaginative construction' that he identifies here. One of these barriers is the relatively strong and specific legislative position that religious education holds in England. Because of the political influence of powerful church lobbies, it is unlikely that we will any time soon see a change to the distinctive legal position of religious education, which—unlike any other national curriculum subject—is compulsory for all state schools, for all year groups, and even for a specified minimum number of hours. However, a legal justification is not a philosophical justification. A lack of cultural awareness—about how religious education is *actually taught* in different contexts or about how it *could* be taught—is a further imaginative barrier. The term 'religious education' is not used consistently across national contexts, and when globally diverse scholars of religious education come together, they find themselves discussing quite different curriculum situations. In the American context, religion is designated a private matter by law, it has no discrete curriculum presence in 'public' schools, and its treatment in other curriculum areas is restricted. In many European countries, parents of children in state-funded schools are allowed to choose which stream their children go into for religious education (or a secular alternative) depending on their own religious or other beliefs. Neither case is like the English system—and this is to say nothing of the extent and form in which schools with a specific 'religious' designation are admissible within the state maintained sector.

SOME HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Hirst rejects a 'historicist' view of curriculum on the grounds that '[no] amount of explanation of how it is we have come to have our present curricula can of itself justify what we do' (Hirst 1974a: 11). This is not to say that he wants 'to deny that much curriculum practice has simply "grown" out of its social context and continues so to develop without much overt planning' (p. 10). Of course it has—'[b]ut that does not imply that curricula cannot be effectively changed by rational planning' (p. 10). My own work has called for an extensive 'historicization' of religious education in the curriculum (Aldridge, 2015, 2018), but I do not think Hirst and I are as far apart as it may seem. A historical or sociological explanation of a particular curriculum reality does not justify that reality, but draws attention to its contingency and the numerous turning points at which it could have become otherwise. This has the effect of intensifying the call for a justification of any particular curriculum configuration over an alternative. It is in this spirit, and because I think it will aid reception of Hirst's ideas—not least because, in the case of religious education, he does not seem to hold to the loftier ideals of liberal education—that I offer a brief historical contextualization of Hirst's early work.

The legal context of the 1944 Education Act, to which Hirst draws attention at the start of his 'Morals, Religion' article, was 'that in every maintained school there should be religious instruction and a daily act of collective worship' (Hirst 1974a:

173). Although no religion is specified, in 1965 it went without saying that this referred to Christianity. Note the entanglement in this legislation of the religious 'instruction' (whatever we take that to mean) with compulsory religious *practice* (an entanglement that remained in 1988 and thus in the current legislation for England), which greatly hinders the attempts of some contemporary advocates of religious education to argue that it does not constitute an education *into* or an *advocacy* of either a particular religion or religious belief in general. Determination of the curriculum content of religious education was given over to Local Educational Authorities, who convened a Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE). This legislation, it is thought, enabled avoidance of the thorny issue of whether the Catholic, Anglican or non-conformist churches should dictate the proper curriculum content of religious instruction. William Kay provides an account of how '[t]he system was designed to allow local religious variation to be reflected in local syllabuses' (Kay 2012: 56).

Seminal texts on religious education in the English context prior to 1965 (with which Hirst may or may not have been closely acquainted) included Ronald Goldman's (1964, 1965), reporting an empirical study under the influence of Piaget, from which he derived a psychological hierarchy of religious understanding. Harold Loukes' (1961) *Teenage Religion*, from the theological publishing house SCM Press, also reported an empirical study and advocated beginning with teenage life concerns as a way into theological understanding. The group of young people pictured on the cover of the book sport leather jackets, ducktail haircuts, and sullen expressions of critical challenge. Also indicative of SCM's significant religious education output in the period is Clifford Jones's *Teaching the Bible Today*, on the cover of which a young teacher in academic gown commends to the serried rows of pupils a blackboard on which he has written 'Acts II. St Peter preached that Jesus is the Son of God. He proved this by three things...', while another student points to a map of 'The Holy Land' (Jones 1963).

Changes were afoot. Ninian Smart, who founded England's first university department of Religious Studies and whose writing on religious education in schools began in *The Teacher and Christian Belief* (1966) by urging a critical advocacy of Christianity, had by 1969 become director of the Schools Council Secondary Project on Religious Education. The Council's *Working Paper* (1971) criticized 'confessional' religious education and proposed instead an undogmatic 'phenomenological' approach that studied the major world religions objectively and with reference to the six broadly sociological 'dimensions' of religion (see also Barnes 2000). Locally agreed syllabuses across the country, especially in those areas with particularly large non-Christian immigrant populations, were, under Smart's influence, already moving towards a state of affairs that would become law in the Education (Reform) Act 1988, whereby religious education, it was said, 'shall 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' (section 8.3). From this time it becomes difficult to characterize religious education in England as instruction into the Christian faith.

Alternatively, the Plowden Report of 1967 contained a note on religious education—attributed, among others, to no less a philosophical luminary than A. J. Ayer, who was a member of the report’s central advisory council—arguing that ‘parents should be given the option of enrolling their children for religious instruction or for a secular course in moral and social education’ (Plowden 1967: 491). Thus, between the publication of Hirst’s articles and their republication in *Knowledge and the Curriculum*, the key contours of the debates that still vex curriculum thinking on religious education today are all in evidence: whether religious education in schools should have any particular responsibility for the formation of morality, the extent to which religious education can be thought of as a ‘confessional’ activity of instruction into or advocacy of a particular faith (or of religious faith in general), the extent to which religious education should develop students’ own religious views, and the right of theology, sociology, philosophy, psychology or any other higher education discipline to determine the curriculum content of religious education.

LIBERAL EDUCATION AND THE FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE

Hirst’s liberal education is concerned with the development of mind, which in ‘its most basic sense’ is ‘necessarily the achievement of knowledge’ (Hirst 1974a: 42). In selecting ‘knowledge’ as the fundamental curriculum objective, Hirst claims he has ‘reached the ultimate point where the question of justification ceases to be significantly applicable’, since: ‘To ask for the justification of any form of activity is significant only if one is in fact committed already to seeking rational knowledge’ (p. 42). Having made this commitment to knowledge as determining the ‘scope and content’ of a liberal education (p. 41), it is then necessary for curriculum planning purposes to consider how it can be subdivided or specified in its completeness. Hirst’s forms of knowledge ‘constitute the range of unique ways we have of understanding human experience’ (p. 46). They are ‘not collections of information, but the complex ways of understanding experience which man has achieved, which are publicly specifiable and which are gained through learning’ (p. 38) and each ‘involves the development of creative imagination, judgement, thinking communicative skills, etc., in ways that are peculiar to itself as a way of understanding experience’ (p. 38). Forms of knowledge have ‘logical characteristics’ which are not to be confused by curriculum planners with ‘psychological processes’ or ‘a series of intellectual steps’ (p. 50).

The forms of knowledge are ‘mathematics, physical sciences, human sciences, history, religion, literature and the fine arts and philosophy’ (p. 46) and Hirst proposes four distinguishing features possessed by all of them: (1) ‘They each involve certain concepts that are peculiar in character to the form’; (2) they have ‘a distinctive logical structure’; (3) each ‘by virtue of its particular terms and logic, has expressions or statements (possibly answering a distinctive type of question) that in some way or other, however indirect it may be, are testable against experience’; and (4) ‘The forms have developed particular techniques and skills for exploring experience and testing their distinctive expressions’ (p. 44). A reader might assume at this point that since religion was included in Hirst’s list of forms of knowledge, he takes

religious knowledge to have all of these features, although the only gloss on religion that we specifically find in 'Liberal Education' is that 'Because of their particular logical features it seems to me to distinguish also as separate disciplines both historical and religious knowledge' (p. 45). We need to turn to Hirst's article on 'Morals, Religion and the Maintained School' (Hirst 1965b), published almost in parallel with 'Liberal Education', to unpack further implications for curriculum planning.

Before we do so, it is worth clarifying exactly what Hirst does and does not commit himself to by identifying religion as a form of knowledge, which is not a great deal at this stage. First, although Hirst uses the term 'discipline' interchangeably with 'form', he does not mean hereby to identify the forms with the disciplines of higher education. From this early stage, Hirst is keen to point out that even those university disciplines that look as if they closely correspond to the logical forms of knowledge constitute an admixture of logical forms, so that a course in a natural science, for example, might also include some study of the history of science. There are also those 'fields' of academic endeavour that 'are formed by building together round specific objects ... knowledge that is characteristically rooted elsewhere in more than one discipline' (p. 46). The inclusion of religious knowledge as a curriculum objective, therefore, does not commit a curriculum planner to identifying it with some specific university discipline, or to whatever curriculum arrangements currently obtain for religion. Hirst points out that school subjects 'in the disciplines as we at present have them', which in most cases 'have developed under a number of diverse influences', are 'in no way sacrosanct on either logical or psychological grounds' (p. 50) and that '[s]uperficially at least most of them would seem to be quite inappropriate' from the point of liberal education (p. 51). Religious knowledge does not necessarily even need to be taught in a *discrete* curriculum space, since: 'Though a liberal education is most usually approached directly in the study of various branches of the disciplines, I see no reason to think that this must necessarily be so' (p. 51). Hirst is even well disposed to the possibility of constructing for school subjects new educational fields that connect the forms of knowledge in ways that might be best suited, on psychological or other grounds, to educating young minds. The point of the forms is that they do not specify the psychologically most effective way of delivering a curriculum, but instead define in logical terms 'the range of knowledge as a whole' that a curriculum 'must be constructed to cover' (p. 47). And to this Hirst seems to have committed himself: that wherever it is best included, the curriculum must 'in some measure' cover religious knowledge (p. 47).

MORALS, RELIGION AND THE MAINTAINED SCHOOL

In 'Morals, Religion and the Maintained School' (1965b), Hirst claims to be interested in two philosophical questions. 'First, is man's moral understanding necessarily dependent on his religious knowledge or beliefs? ... Secondly, what is the status of religious belief? Is there here a domain of knowledge or simply one of beliefs? And if the latter is the case, is it justifiable for state maintained schools to instruct

pupils in one particular faith and to conduct worship in accordance with it?’ (Hirst 1974a: 173).

With respect to the first question, Hirst argues that morals can be known independently of religion. Therefore in his view moral education need not be connected with the teaching of religion. Whether ‘a Christian complement to moral education on a rational basis’ is permissible in maintained schools—that is, whether it is ‘a function’ of a maintained school ‘to complement what is achieved on a rational basis with instruction in specifically Christian moral principles to teach the religious significance of moral matters and to encourage a Christian style of life’ (p. 180)—connects Hirst’s two initial questions. The answer depends on ‘The fundamental philosophical question that arises for religious education in maintained schools’, i.e. ‘whether or not there is in religion a form of publicly accepted knowledge or belief that it is appropriate for these schools in our society to hand on’ (p. 180).

Hirst’s use of the term ‘forms of knowledge’ is not consistent with the more fully worked out position presented in ‘Liberal Education’ and discussed above; this is evident in Hirst’s reference to ‘the forms of knowledge which are indisputably accepted in school’, in which ‘there is no doubt whatever about the validity of the vast amount of what is taught’ (p. 180). The strict conceptual separation between the logical forms of knowledge and the school curriculum subjects does not occur here. On knowledge, Hirst presents the more general principle that ‘[w]hat knowledge we teach, we teach because it comes up to publicly accepted rational tests, convinced that all those prepared to investigate the matter to the appropriate extent will agree on the results’ (p. 180). This principle can be applied to the question of whether or not it is permissible to teach some proposed unit of ‘knowledge’, but it is not yet a fully worked up ‘basic’ or ‘fundamental’ principle for the planning of a whole curriculum, along the lines of a ‘Liberal Education’. Hirst’s conclusion is clear:

If in fact, as seems to be the case at present, there are no agreed public tests whereby true and false can be distinguished in religious claims, then we can hardly maintain that we have a domain of religious knowledge and truth. All that we can claim there is, is a domain of beliefs and the acceptance of any one set of these must be recognised as a matter of personal decision. (Hirst 1974a: 181)

The implication for curriculum ‘is not to say that in maintained schools there ought not to be factual instruction about the beliefs that have played and do play so large a part in our history, literature and way of life’, but ‘that positive instruction in the beliefs and practices of any one religion should be strictly the function of other agencies, the family, the churches and interested voluntary associations’ (p. 182). It follows from this that moral education in schools ought to be conducted independently of religion, that education in a distinctively Christian form of morality would also be the function of one of those agencies, and that the 1944 Education Act’s requirement for a daily act of collective worship is ‘unjustifiable’ (p. 186) because ‘it is quite impossible for a child ... to worship unless he already accepts some religious beliefs’ and ‘[s]eriously to take part in religious worship is therefore necessarily to be trained in an activity that is part of some quite specific religious way of life and assumes quite specific beliefs’ (p. 183).

The distinction Hirst offers between instruction *about* and *in* religious beliefs is quite familiar to those who have engaged with the more contemporary debate about whether religious education can be considered 'confessional' or 'non-confessional'. Hirst's position is clear, that confessional religious education is a function of the private sphere, and that schools should restrict themselves to the non-confessional. Also important is the claim that instruction should be about *beliefs*, because there is no publicly accepted body of knowledge to 'hand on' (p. 180). Thus characterized, religion does not, according to the taxonomy set out in 'Liberal Education', meet the criteria for inclusion as a discrete form of knowledge.

Having stated so boldly that there are no publicly agreed tests for the truth of religious claims, Hirst muddies the water a little by spending a significant portion of the article very sensitively considering some 'signs of hope' (p. 184) or possible candidates for such tests: these include Farrer's rational theology, 'in which natural analogues afford a basic knowledge of God on which the claim to revealed knowledge can rest' (p. 185), and the claim that religious language, through the use of analogical talk about God, in fact 'picks out man's awareness that the universe is not self-explanatory' and other mysteries of the numinous (p. 185). Hirst concludes this section with the rumination that 'perhaps this is just crystal gazing' and the summary that '[i]n the present state of affairs ... philosophical considerations would seem to suggest that ... thoroughly open instruction about religious beliefs is all that we ought to have' (p. 186).

It is hard to reconcile Hirst's claim in 'Liberal Education' that religion is a form of knowledge, in his formal, philosophical sense, with the implication in 'Morals, Religion' that it is not. To say that religious education is about beliefs rather than knowledge is not, of course, to say that nothing can be known about religion. Plenty can be known about these beliefs, but if any forms of knowledge seem to apply to the understanding of religious belief in 'Morals, Religion', these would appear to be those of history, literature (p. 182), and the human sciences; but this would imply the constitution of religious education as one of Hirst's 'fields' rather than as a logical form of knowledge in its own right. Hirst has the opportunity to present religious education as a field in 'Liberal Education' but emphatically does not. Furthermore, if religious education is to be constituted as a curriculum field through which certain forms of knowledge might be delivered, this would be justified on 'psychological' or pedagogical, rather than philosophical grounds, in that such a mode of delivery might be demonstrated to be a more effective way of teaching some essential elements of the various forms of knowledge than doing so through their related subject disciplines. Hirst does not in this article offer any philosophical justification for religious education on the curriculum. He acknowledges and responds positively to the concern that without religious instruction there is 'a danger that what are to many the most ultimately important questions in life might never be discussed in school' (p. 182), but does not elaborate on this as a justification for religion on the curriculum. In fact, he concerns himself in the paper with negative restrictions on religion in schools—that religion should not be taught as the justification of moral knowledge, that teachers should not attempt to hand on religious beliefs as 'knowledge', and that there ought not to be compulsory Christian worship in state maintained schools.

Although the idea of liberal education has its own completeness and is basic in that any other curriculum considerations will presuppose it, Hirst is clear that liberal education ‘is only one part of the education a person ought to have, for it omits quite deliberately for instance specialist education, physical education and character training’ (p. 51); with reference to religious education in particular, in response to D. Z. Phillips, Hirst writes that ‘educational practice is not properly *determined* by philosophical considerations. But then whoever thought it was?’ (1970: 215). But Hirst does not in his 1965 paper offer another consideration that would appear to *positively* establish religious education as necessary in the curriculum. One might ask, then, whether the two papers illustrate the difference between approaching religion and the curriculum through a ‘piecemeal’ or ‘total’ approach, in that ‘Morals, Religion’ begins with the legislation—it takes curriculum religious education as a given—then asks what might be permissible within that space. This appears to dodge the question of the relevant objectives whereby religion would merit a discrete curriculum space and therefore seems not to be in the spirit of Hirst’s ambitious aims in ‘Liberal Education’.

We could interpret Hirst’s inclusion of religion into the forms of knowledge with a generous spoonful of caution. He certainly does not say much to justify religion’s inclusion in that list. Perhaps it is included only in the spirit in which he claims—following his extended discussion of possible, but not yet established, public tests for the truth of religious claims in ‘Morals, Religion’—that

in the interests of enlightened educational practice we cannot afford to ignore the highly significant developments which at present are taking place in the study of these domains. For clearly these developments could transform not only our ideas as to what education maintained schools ought to provide but also our ideas on how best to set about those difficult tasks of moral and religious education that do properly fall within their purview. (Hirst 1965b: 186–7)

Perhaps religion is included in the forms of knowledge as a sort of agnostic placeholder—it is not yet known to be a form of knowledge in its own right, but deserves consideration as it might yet be discovered to be.

Perhaps we try too hard to reconcile the two articles, given that they were probably written more or less contemporaneously. We could have in ‘Morals, Religion’ simply the early work of a developing philosopher who—however formidable his influence proved to be—had not fully worked out his commitment to the forms of knowledge as set out in ‘Liberal Education’. The second phase of his work would therefore be an opportunity to work through this reconciliation, or perhaps to come down more clearly on one side or the other.

HIRST’S LATER RESTATEMENTS

‘The Forms of Knowledge Revisited’² (Hirst 1974a: 84–100) would certainly seem to support my ‘agnostic placeholder’ speculation, although again this is not a tack that Hirst explicitly takes. Hirst chooses to modify his initial list of forms, arguing that history and social science are both complex fields that each include, along

² This chapter in Hirst (1974a) was originally published as Hirst (1973a).

with others, a distinct form of ‘inter-personal knowledge’, so this replaces those two original ‘forms’. But he does not take the opportunity either to leave out religion or explicitly to ascribe to it a different status from the other forms. In the discussion of religion more specifically, he does consider whether religion might be more appropriately considered what he earlier terms a ‘field’: ‘In so far as religion is cognitive at all, it seems to me its claims must be understood as being totally reducible to one or more of the other forms of knowledge or as being at least in part a unique form of knowledge in itself’ (p. 89). He argues that ‘some have sought to give an account of religious meaning which has seen its cognitive core to be totally reducible to knowledge belonging to other forms (usually moral, historical or esthetic)’, but then in relation to whether ‘such a reduction can legitimately be carried through’, he simply claims ‘But can it? That I doubt’ (p. 88)—and that is his final word on the matter.

Hirst does reconsider his initial taxonomy and offers a more succinct account of the forms of knowledge: ‘The domain of knowledge I take to be centrally the domain of true propositions or statements, and the question of their being logically distinct forms of knowledge to be the question of their being logically distinct types of true propositions or statements’ (p. 85). On whether religion ‘can lay claim, amongst other things, to being a logically unique form of knowledge’, Hirst is distinctly agnostic: ‘in the present state of affairs we must take the claim to knowledge seriously’ (p. 88). Hirst does take the opportunity to reject on these newly stated grounds a stance that he attributes to himself in ‘Morals, Religion’: ‘it seems to me unclear that one can coherently claim that there is a logically unique domain of religious *beliefs* such that none of them can be known to be true’, since ‘the meaning of religious propositions, as any others, rests on a grasp of the truth criteria for such propositions’ (p. 88). If there are no publicly agreed tests whereby religious beliefs might be known to be true, they cannot even be known to be meaningful. This correction of his earlier position is incorporated in the addendum Hirst provides for the reprinted version of ‘Morals, Religion’ in *Knowledge and the Curriculum* (1974a): ‘certain paragraphs can be taken to imply that we have a domain of religious beliefs that may well be autonomous or logically unique in character but for which we have no unique truth criteria’ (p. 187). As I have argued above, I do not think Hirst actually makes any such claim in the earlier article. This might represent an attempt on Hirst’s part to connect what he wrote there with ‘Liberal Education’, but the forms of knowledge thesis does not actually intrude in ‘Morals, Religion’, and Hirst makes no such claim for the logically unique domain of religious beliefs. Refuting this supposed claim, in any case, leads only to a further *negation* of the suggested content of religious education—it must now be taught in such a way that it is ‘open’ not only on whether religious claims are true, but also about whether they are even meaningful.

Hirst does then in his addendum offer us something positive, but again it concerns the content of religious education rather than its justification on the curriculum. He considers that his argument that teaching can only be ‘about’ religion could imply ‘a study of religion that is always one remove from actually getting to grips with the truth claims religions make’ (p. 187). This idea of ‘getting to grips’ is tantalizing. It seems to resist a reduction of religious education to ‘a matter of

studying the psychology, the sociology or history of religion' (p. 187), but again, this claim follows a rather emphatic rejection of the idea that religion is a discrete form of knowledge! Hirst gets himself into rather tricky territory when he claims that 'pupils can only understand any religious position if they begin to grasp its concepts and therefore its truth criteria' and that teaching 'about' religion must include 'a direct study of religions, which means entering as fully as possible into an understanding of what they claim to be true' (p. 187). Although in the earlier article Hirst is emphatic that the 1988 act is wrong in requiring acts of Christian worship, here he claims that some 'engagement' with acts of worship will be necessary for this understanding; this will even include participation in them, with the distinction from participating in a religious practice being maintained by 'how they understand the situation and the point of what they do' and by the intention 'always that they shall understand, never that they shall or shall not personally accept the religious beliefs under consideration' (p. 188).

THE 'PRACTICE TURN'

Other articles in this issue will no doubt deal in more detail with the surprising late-life development of Hirst's thought. His thoughts on religious education are not developed considerably during this phase, although he does have a great deal to say on the matter of religion. On the 'practice turn' I will summarize simply by referring to his remarks that 'a good life is to be found in the satisfaction of needs and interests in relation to the social practices available to us' (Hirst 1999: 128) and that education must therefore be a 'progressive initiation into those social practices in relation to which each individual can find their greatest satisfaction and fulfilment' (p. 130). Where theoretical reason had been paramount in determining the aims and objectives of education, it now becomes secondary to initiation into practices, and 'we must recognise that education can no longer be rationalistically planned' (Hirst 1993: 194). However, Hirst clings to an extent to the forms of knowledge, and even their specific relation to religion: 'I still hold that forms of theoretical knowledge can be distinguished in terms of the logical features and truth criteria of the propositions with which they are primarily concerned. I still consider the propositional elements in moral, religious and aesthetic understanding to be central to the proper characterization of those areas...' (p. 196). Incredibly tantalizing, because it is not further developed, is the suggestion that religion is taken to be an area of social practices *sui generis*, so that '[w]hat then becomes crucial is directly introducing pupils to the kinds of practices each area involves and to critical reflection on these' (p. 198).

Hirst's frank reflection during this period on his (in his view unusually extreme) religious upbringing is also fascinating (2008, 2010). Here, he is prepared to be rather less agnostic on religious matters than he has previously expressed. On the view of religion 'as propositional truths about spiritual realities and historical events whose validity rests on their revelation in written Scriptures' (Hirst 2010: 170), he is prepared to say that 'the claims made in these beliefs I judge to be purely

Hannam 2018; see also Aldridge 2015, 2021). However, I have argued that such approaches are weakened by accepting religious education as a curriculum ‘given’ (Aldridge 2021). Biesta and Hannam, for example, have offered compelling expressions of *education’s* existential challenge, which is not only a challenge that emerges in religious education. Without a consideration of religious education’s curriculum question, they become justifications of an existential conception of curriculum rather than of a discrete curriculum space dedicated to the study of religion. The formidable value of Hirst’s work is that he asks the ‘curriculum question’ of religious education, even though he never answers it directly. In my own work, I have tried always to keep open religious education’s curriculum question, although alongside that I have sought to encourage acquiescence in the fact that no once-and-for-all or transcendent answer can be given to guarantee religion’s place in a curriculum of the future (Aldridge 2011, 2015, 2018). Any curriculum content, especially religious content, needs always to remain questionable, or in question. The philosophical discussion of religious education needs therefore to keep Hirst’s question about curriculum justification alive, or suffer as a result.

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