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Stern, J. (2020) 'Uncertainty and Mortality: Two Stubborn Particulars of Religious Education' in Franck, O and Thalén, P (eds) (2021) Religious Education in a Post-Secular Age: Case Studies from Europe; Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, chapter 7, pp 123-138. In: Religious Education in a Post-Secular Age: Case Studies from Europe. Palgrave, London, pp. 123-138. ISBN 9783030475031.

This is an Accepted Manuscript published by Springer in its final form on 26th October 2020 at <u>https://www.palgrave.com/qp/book/9783030475024</u>

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Chapter 7

Uncertainty and Mortality: Two Stubborn Particulars of Religious Education Julian Stern j.stern@yorksj.ac.uk York St John University York, UK

1. Introduction

There is a craving for certainty. Since the seventeenth century, models of scientific and administrative-bureaucratic certainty have promoted a confidence that attempted, it seems, to replace the confidence—the faith—in religion. Descartes was one of the builders of this model. He created a logic and epistemology that was compelling—starting with a proof of his existence (his 'cogito ergo sum', 'I think therefore I am', Descartes 1912, p. 27), in the Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences. Later in the same text, he illustrated the power of philosophy in science by 'proving', contrary to Harvey's recent publications, that blood circulated by heat rather than by being pumped—that is, i.e. the heart was a 'furnace' not a pump (Fye 2003). Interestingly, Fye—in a journal of cardiology—does not use Descartes' error to demonstrate that Descartes' philosophical certainty was unreasonable. Instead, he writes of how Descartes encouraged Harvey to complete more experiments, and therefore stimulated further, good quality, cardiological science. That is a generous assessment. Descartes' belief in certainty, and his belief that philosophy could bring certainty to science, is problematic. It is misleading when it comes to how scientists work, and it is misleading in giving the impression to non-scientists, and to non-philosophers, that there is a standard of certainty that can be reached, as modelled by science and philosophy. Within contemporary education, the influence continues, especially in the prioritising of 'powerful knowledge' above deep understanding, exploration, insights, attitudes, and skills. The prioritising of certainty in education is particularly inimical to religious education, and to religion, in a 'post-secular' world where a wide range of mutually_contradictory religious and non-religious beliefs and practices co-exist in all societies and, thanks to electronic media, are visible to all. It is not that all certainty is damaging: it is the ability of certainty to 'drown out' uncertainty, excluding legitimate and valuable uncertainties, that is critiqued here. This chapter therefore explores the

value of uncertainty in religious education, and to complement this, it explores one particular certainty—that of mortality—that is addressed by religious education.

My concern with the nature and significance of uncertainty in school religious education was stimulated by being invited to join a project called 'big ideas for RE' (Wintersgill 2017). The project aimed for the 'identification of Principles and Big Ideas for RE, which can then be used as criteria for selecting and sequencing subject content' (personal correspondence). It was based on similar work in science education (Harlen 2010, 2015). The religious education project was chaired by Michael Reiss—a science educator involved in Harlen's project. In the 'big ideas for RE' meetings, one of the religious education specialists noted how difficult it was in religious education to deal with the presence of conflicting truth statements (there is or there isn't a god, Jesus is or isn't the son of God, when we die we are or are not reincarnated). Most teachers avoid answering the 'is it true?' question with a response like 'many people believe it is true'. There is a tension in religious education between conflicting truths (there is a great deal of fundamental disagreement between—and within—religious traditions), and the wish to say 'let us not worry about truth for now, and try to understand what different people believe' (the epoché, or suspension of disbelief, of phenomenological research). A more extreme version of that tension is between those who believe there is one truth that should be promoted in religious education (and all other views must be described as incorrect), and those who believe there is no such thing as absolute truth and all positions are equally valid ('this is not a matter of true or false'). Truth, in other words, divides teachers. When the 'big ideas in RE' group raised this issue, what did Reiss, the science educator, say? He drew our attention to the 'big ideas in science' and explained that, in the science documents, there was no mention at all of 'truth'.

A scientific theory or model representing relationships between variables or components of a system must fit the observations available at the time and lead to predictions that can be tested. Any theory or model is provisional and subject to revision in the light of new data even though it may have led to predictions in accord with data in the past. Every model has its strengths and limitations in accounting for observations. (Harlen 2010, p. 23)

Even more straightforward is the statement that '[s]cientific explanations, theories and models are those that best fit the evidence available at a particular time' (Harlen 2015, p. 17). The word 'truth' is not mentioned: scientists are not trading in truths, but in 'best fits' to the available evidence. Religious education seems to be more concerned than science is with the role of truth in the curriculum. There are other approaches to science, no doubt, but this 'living without truth' version is particularly interesting. It suggests that the influence of Cartesian 'certainty' may be more present in religious education than in science-after science, through the falsifiability thesis of Popper (2002, pp. 57–73) or Heisenberg's 'uncertainty principle' (Heisenberg 1927, with which Popper 1967 disagreed), left certainty behind. Sinclair, a UK science educator, researches the 'messy' nature of real science. Children and young people should be taught about 'famous scientists' not because they are the 'guardians of truth', but because they demonstrate how uncertain science is and how most of their discoveries and theories have since then been disproven or superseded. As physicist Richard Feynman says, 'I would rather have questions that can't be answered than answers that can't be questioned' (quoted in Sinclair and Strachan 2016, p. 21). Science education therefore should be just as messy as religious education. The similarities are stressed by the philosopher of science Karl Popper.

My thesis is that what we call 'science' is differentiated from the older myths not by being something distinct from a myth, but by being accompanied by a second-order tradition—that of critically discussing the myth. ... If we understand that, then ... [w]e shall understand that, in a certain sense, science is myth-making just as religion is. (Popper 2002, pp. 170–171) In response to Popper's claim, many religious education specialists will say that there is also a very strong tradition of 'critical discussion' within religions and within religious education. Yet having a philosopher of science like Popper describe science and religion as so similar is a valuable reminder of the uncertainty at the heart of both. And the religious education scholar Durka, in a powerful phrase, takes us directly to the heart of my argument by highlighting 'the learned uncertainty of teachers' (Durka 2002, p. 1). Religious education in a post-secular world is—or should be—at the forefront of understanding how teachers and students are and will always be living in uncertainty, whilst *also* searching for truth. Truth and uncertainty without truth is confusion; truth without uncertainty is stale.

This chapter presents uncertainty and mortality as two 'stubborn particulars' (Cherry 1995) of post-secular, non-confessional, RE: its distinctive features and its distinctive contribution to the curriculum.

2. Uncertainty in Religious Education

Donald Rumsfeld, US Secretary of State for Defence was talking about evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. What he said about the information available to him—the information (and lack of information) that led to the US-led and UK-supported invasion of Iraq in 2003—has become his most quoted statement:

There are known knowns. There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we do not know we don't know. (Quoted in Logan 2009, p. 712)

Although at the time, Rumsfeld was much joked about, what he said (if not the policy it justified) was perfectly sensible. Indeed, it may have been based on a famous technique known as the Johari Window (Luft 1963), which has been used by psychologists and counsellors since the 1960s to explore what we know about ourselves. It is also useful—I suggest—as a way of understanding the subject-matter of religious education. With a philosophy of education, Aimee Quickfall, I have developed a version of the Johari window, taking account of Rumsfeld's description, and adapting it further for use in educational contexts. As the 'Johari' Window was named for shortened versions of the forenames of the authors (i.e. Joseph and Harry), Quickfall and I describe this as the *Jumee Window*. Sidbrytning.

Fig. 7.1 A Jumee Window

Each of the four boxes, A, B, C and D, can be described in more detail and exemplified.

A. Some religious education focuses on the known knowns, that which is already known by everyone in the room. These are the familiar and oft-repeated facts and topics covered in lessons over many years. At Christmas most Christians celebrate Jesus' birth; Muslims

are likely to pray in mosques; Hindus often believe in reincarnation. There is no problem in repeating familiar facts. Children and young people enjoy knowing things and repeating them back. Seasonal celebrations and rituals—repeated singing of, say, Christmas carols—can be valuable keystones in the lives of the school community.

- B. Much religious education (and most of what I used to teach) focuses on the unknown knowns: the facts as yet unknown to the children and young people, but known to the teacher or the writers of textbooks or exam papers. There are no great surprises, and learners can gain 'powerful' knowledge (Young, in Young et al. 2014, pp. 65-88). The thirteenth_-century Afghan poet Rumi similarly describes the memorising of facts as what helps you 'rise in the world' as you 'stroll ... in and out of fields of knowledge' (Rumi 1995, p. 178).
- C. This is the category that covers much of what those in universities describe as research. As Logan says, much professional scientific research is based on developing known unknowns into known knowns. 'At the outset the researcher does not know whether or not the results will support the ... hypothesis', but 'it is common for the researcher to believe that the result that will be obtained will be within a range of known possibilities' (Logan 2009, p. 712).
- D. 'Occasionally', Logan continues, 'the result is completely unexpected—it was an unknown unknown' (Logan 2009, p. 712). This window includes the odd surprises such as the accidental 'discovery' of penicillin by Alexander Fleming (who forgot to put away his petri dishes), the accidental development of the Post-it note by Spencer Silver and Arthur Fry (originally a 'failed' attempt to develop a glue), or the accidental 'discovery' of saccharin by Constantine Fahlberg (who didn't wash her hands before lunch and found the lunch strangely sweet). But it also includes the profoundly mysterious or ineffable. This type of learning is important to all of schooling, and most important for—and most distinctively characteristic of—religious education. As Moore says, 'Religious educators are called to inspire, encourage, inform, interpret, and mentor with people ... [who] live on a bridge between the expressible and inexpressible, supported on one side by the mysteries of religious experience, and on the other, by words and explanations from their cultures and religious traditions' (Moore 1998, p. 271). Classroom relationships in

religious education 'focus on the bridge where people live—where they encounter the ineffable and cannot resist expressing the inexpressible' (Moore 1998, p. 271).

All four types of learning have their own contributions to make to schooling. 'A' and 'B' learning are useful—as Rumi described in the thirteenth century, and as Young et al. (2014), Hirsch (2016) and Prothero (2007) describe it in more recent years. Hirsch writes of 'why knowledge matters', whilst Prothero (2007) writes specifically of religious literacy-finishing his influential book with a dictionary of key terms (across a number of religions), and a quizwith answers. Both Hirsch and Prothero bemoan the lack of a common knowledge amongst America's youth (and adults), and both suggest that such 'A' and 'B' knowledge (as I refer to them) should be equitably distributed—for precisely the same 'rise in the world' social mobility reasons as given by Rumi. Many of the apparently well-known 'facts' covered by religious education are not as certain as they at first appear, and are often problematic overgeneralisations, or are incorrect, or are vigorously contested. (A simple example is the naming of the Muhammad as the 'founder' of Islam, whilst Muslims typically see Islam as pre-dating the 'final prophet'.) Yet the value of religious literacy in the sense promoted by Prothero is significant. It cannot, however, provide a complete description of the knowledge to be addressed by a curriculum. 'C' and 'D' learning are also of vital importance. 'C' learning might be described as conventional research, developing and sharing new insights as a result of investigating an issue (see Stern 2018a). Those insights and issues—in religious education—can be very personal, the thoughts and ideas that we all have, about topics such as the meaning of life and death. As well as 'C' learning, religious education-like every subject-should also stretch into 'D' learning (also in Stern 2018a), the learning that is surprising and unexpected perhaps even by the researcher, the learning that might be difficult to express clearly. Aldous Huxley describes 'D' learning well, when he says this:

From pure sensation to the intuition of beauty, from pleasure and pain to love and the mystical ecstasy and death—all the things that are fundamental, all the things that, to the human spirit, are most profoundly significant, can only be experienced, not expressed. The rest is always and everywhere silence.

After silence that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music. (And, significantly, silence is an integral part of all good music.....). (Huxley 1950, p. 19)

Uncertainty and silence and the exploration of the personal—all are to be experienced and nurtured in religious education, in the face of the (known and unknown) 'unknowns' of religious education, and the contested character of most of religious education's most valuable 'knowns'. As Rumi describes it, this second kind of intelligence is 'a spring overflowing its springbox' and is 'fluid'—'a fountainhead / from within you, moving out' (Rumi 1995, p. 178).

There is much talk in religious education about the need for knowledge and the need for mastery (James and Stern 2019). Yet both knowledge (in its 'A' and 'B' senses) and mastery seem to be based on the assumption that knowledge is safe, bounded and uncontested, and this does not seem appropriate in religious education-especially in non-confessional religious education. It is important to promote curiosity in religious education (the real purpose of James and Stern 2019, and Stern 2018a, b), which allows for surprise (Stern 2013). Surprise is a symptom of 'C' and 'D' learning taking place. It is a sign of research taking place. And it is a sign that religious education is more than a 'festival of facts'-more than, not an alternative to, a festival of facts. Curiosity is needed as much by teachers as by students. Religious education teachers can be overwhelmed by the amount of knowledge they need to accrue to teach the subject with integrity and confidence. Experienced teachers, let alone trainee teachers, at both primary and secondary levels are prone to being daunted by the amount of 'stuff' in a subject that covers many religions and non-religious ways of life, and that attempts to recognise the diversity within as well as between traditions. Why would they not be daunted? They are responsible for a subject that draws on the whole world's cultures. Some will respond by restricting their work to 'A' and 'B' learning, and will ask for a book that describes the facts they have to know, to teach the subject. Others will respond by being exciting at the prospect of engaging with such a huge-largely unknown-subject, a subject that screams out for 'C' and 'D' learning. I wish to encourage more and more teachers to join this latter group.

A keen sense of uncertainty can be paralysing. However, with the right encouragement, uncertainty becomes the stimulus for the very best of education. Teachers need to nurture their own creative uncertainty, and they need to nurture the same in their students. That will stimulate a process of exploration, including exploration of their own values and beliefs. The 'learned uncertainty of teachers' has the capacity to motivate and excite, encouraging teachers and students to listen more attentively to others. A pedagogy that is driven by curiosity and openness, the search (and the re-search) for insights, a dive into the profoundly mysterious, is an approach that is both viable and, in religious education, the only credible approach to teaching and learning. As Durka says, 'When we regard teaching as a "dance" between the knowers and the material, ... [t]he focus is not on instant answers but rather on adventure, wrestling with untruth, silence and listening' (Durka 2002, p. 18). This means that we cannot 'withdraw into an attitude of omnipotence' because, if we do, 'we lose opportunities to learn from our students, and we fail to provide an atmosphere for them to discover what they know' (Durka 2002, p. 41).

Teaching is unpredictable from hour to hour, from minute to minute. There are tears when you don't expect them, laughter when you might predict tears. There are flashes of insight and embarrassing displays of ignorance. The results are usually uncertain. (Durka 2002, p. 63)

Durka concludes, saying that '[t]he more attuned we are to the needs of our students, the more unsure we are of what they or we actually achieve', and '[t]he more we engage with our students as persons, the more we affirm our own incompleteness ... [as w]e become more aware of spaces still to be explored, desires still to be uncovered, possibilities still to be opened' (Durka 2002, p. 64).

The Certainty of Mortality and Our Uncertain Knowledge of Death

Matching a much-needed recognition of uncertainty, is the certainty of mortality. (The certainty of mortality is accompanied, it should be said, by profound mystery: as Peter Pan says, 'To die will be an awfully big adventure', Barrie 2004, p. 84). During a classroom conversation on mourning and death, being filmed as part of a research project (Bakker and ter Avest, in Avest et al. 2009, p. 165), one boy in a group of 'troublesome and tough' students starts crying. The teacher offers the opportunity to 'go to the restroom', but the boy wants to stay in the classroom.

Meanwhile, another boy whispers to the person with the camera that they should not zoom in on the crying boy. Allowing an upset student to go to the restroom is kind and helpful. Even kinder is the atmosphere in the class that made the student comfortable staying, and allowed another student to keep attention off him. How much better is such an approach than the vague talk in euphemisms that usually accompanies the topic of death, vague references to going to a better place or sleeping or floating off to heaven (never hell) in a non-specific indeterminable way. (It is not my intention to downplay beliefs in life after death in heaven: I am concerned, rather, that too many people use 'they are in heaven now' as an *insincere* way of avoiding discussing death.) There is a certainty in mortality and it is important that this is recognised in religious education. Rosenzweig, a post-secular philosopher before his time, promotes the importance of recognising mortality. He describes much of enlightenment intellectual life-stimulated by Descartes' philosophy—as suffering from a 'paralysis' (Rosenzweig 1999, p. 39), a form of 'acute apoplexia philosophica' (Rosenzweig 1999, p. 59). Whereas '[c]ommon sense puts its faith in the strength of reality', he says, '[t]he philosopher, suspicious, retreats from the flow of reality into the protected circle of his wonder ... [where, b]ounded by his magic circle of mounting wonder, he is not interested in the actual event' (Rosenzweig 1999, p. 42). The most obviously avoided 'actual event' is death: 'reason's illness' is 'merely an attempt to elude death' (Rosenzweig 1999, p. 102). Teachers, similarly, may be 'lost for words' (Holland 2001, p. 46) when it comes to our mortality. They may be paralysed by the prospect of death, as much as by the prospect of the vastness of possible learning in religious education. And yet religious education, of all school subjects, can and should recognise mortality.

The poet Phillip Larkin talks of 'the intrusion of death into our lives' (quoted in Bradford 2005, p. 259), and here I am encouraging this intrusion into a discussion of religious education. It is one of the ways in which we can care for our learners (Noddings 2005, 2006). Many religious education lessons on death rehearse well-known 'facts': Christians believe in heaven (and perhaps hell), Hindus have reincarnation, atheists believe that death is an absolute end, and so on. Yet a questionnaire carried out in 1997 as part of an RE Festival (http://old.natre.org.uk/db/) asked children and young people aged 7–18 many things including what they thought happened to them when they die. Their responses are most informative, in the sense described by Durka. The students had their own views on what happens when they die (their own 'C' learning,

unknown to most religious education teachers), and these views were expressed more powerfully than the textbook accounts available to them. Here are four (uncorrected) example responses from 11-year-olds:

I think that death is just a place you have to go back to. Everyone is going to go there weather they like it or not.

I dont think there is such thing as an afterlife and when we die we are dead and that is the end of us but if we are murdered we turn into spirits.

You go to a church to have a cermoney and people cry. You get beried and get eaton by maggots or over animals. You get to sleep and be peaceful.

I afraid of death but part of me want's to die.

What is surprising, I suggest, is not that these views are 'correct' or 'incorrect' (according to the students' own reported religious or non-religious allegiances), or that they are sophisticated or philosophically interesting responses (even if many of them are). The surprise is that the students seem to have such strong, deeply felt, personal views, views that most teachers of religious education (myself included) avoid asking about and avoid thinking about. On this as on most topics, teachers tend to focus on the 'certainties' of 'A' and 'B' learning, and miss out 'C' and 'D' learning. Even when schools teach about death (and not all do), death itself is not always allowed to make an appearance. The real views of students and teachers on the topic are often suppressed. Those situations are examples of what Rosenzweig describes as *apoplexia philosophica*, a surfeit of Cartesian certainty. Children and young people know about death, but they also know that schools will often ignore or actively suppress such 'reality'. A rare—and therefore surprising—exception to the suppression of death in school is provided by Basil Hume (later, Cardinal Hume), when head of Ampleforth School. He described the school to prospective parents. When asked what Ampleforth prepared its boys for, he replied, 'We prepare them for death' (quoted in Pirrie 2005, p. 8).

Kessler writes about the need in schools with 'soul' (Kessler 2000) to be places where 'we know how to let ourselves grieve', so that 'we can lose a loved one or end a relationship, a class, or phase of life with a sense of completion and fullness that allows us to love again next time' (Kessler, in Liston and Garrison 2004, p. 152). In contrast, '[w]hen we are so afraid of grief that we close our hearts to sadness, the doorways to love, to beauty, to joy are closed as well' (Kessler, in Liston and Garrison 2004, p. 152). There are many books on the topic that can be used sensitively in schools. Bruna's (2018), *Dear Grandma Bunny* can be used with very young children:

Miffy felt so very sad. Why was it Miffy cried? What had caused that teardrop? Her grandmother had died. (Bruna 2018)

Older primary and younger secondary students might use *Michael Rosen's Sad Book* (Rosen and Blake 2004):

This is me being sad. Maybe you think I'm being happy in this picture. Really I'm being sad but pretending I'm being happy. I'm doing that because I think people won't like me if I look sad.

Care is shown when these issues, issues that children and adults think about and experience, are raised sensitively and honestly (Stern 2018b). Religious education, of all subjects of the curriculum, has a wonderful opportunity to deal with mortality. It will bring people together, even as it recognises how people will also be separated—they will move on to a better place, they may also die. That is a stubborn particular that everyone—young and old—has thought about, though all too few have talked about. Let religious education have a special place in the curriculum, if only for that topic. The certainty of mortality is complemented by our radically uncertain 'knowledge' of what the people we work with think of death—making it a wonderful source of 'C' and 'D' learning for all.

4. Conclusion: The Stubborn Particulars of Uncertainty and

Mortality

We apparently live in a 'post-secular' world (Blond 1998; Bowie 2017). This refers to the 'failure' of the supposed modernist, atheist, secularist project, or the rediscovery of religious elements in apparently secular theories, along with the recognition that much of the world never did go through the 'European'-type process of secularisation. The post-secular world in which we live is one in which people 'stubbornly' persist in disagreeing with each other about almost everything—personal, political, religious, artistic, sporting, and much more. Our contemporary world pushes us, rightly, to recognise the value of the diverse insights gained from religious and non-religious traditions—not least, the insights into our mortality. We need to allow for uncertainty, if we are to recognise value in different traditions. Religious education necessarily recognises the inherent uncertainty that can drive curiosity and care for the full range of traditions studied. So, in conclusion, I want to emphasise four insights:

- Uncertainty (the first stubborn particular of education) drives curiosity in and beyond religious education. It is characteristic of 'C' and 'D' learning.
- Care drives religious education's encounter with mortality (the second stubborn particular of education). Death as a topic in religious education should encourage 'C' and 'D' learning.
- Post-secular schools, communities and societies are *disagreeable*, in the sense that they are filled with conflicting views and ways of being, and these can be explored and exemplified by religious education. Uncertainty is generally a better basis for disagreement than certainty, so the school's role—and particularly religious education's role—in recognising the value of uncertainty can itself contribute to healthy disagreement.
- Without religious education, schools would find it much harder to exhibit care for education and for the people in the school. Religious education is the subject that can and should be saturated in caring, uncertainty and mortality.

Durka's 'learned uncertainty of teachers' is crucial to schools, and consequently is crucial to post-secular communities. Religious education can be uncertainty's, and mortality's, greatest, richest, ally.

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