Critical and creative ways to teach Religion and Philosophy

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Memory, Learning and Story

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There is an old tale I used to tell at school.

A king in his palace looks out above the rooftops and spies a woman taking a bath. She is beautiful; her hair is black and lustrous and he desires her like no-one before. Being a king, this is not a problem. He has her brought over, finds that she is married, but sleeps with her all the same. Neither is her pregnancy a problem – she's married. The husband will think that it's his.

The husband, however, is surprisingly strict and weeks go by when he doesn't 'lay down at home.' So the king grows impatient, puts him in the front line and when he is killed in battle– the king marries the girl. And that is the end of the story.

Except... when a hairy old prophet, hunched and with a massive staff, lumbers up to the throne. The courtiers draw back as he walks through their midst. He smells of the road and the king is immediately in awe. Surely such dishevelment must mean a man of God? The visitor complains of skulduggery in his village – some rich man has stolen his neighbour's only lamb. The king is incensed. 'Show me this wicked man' he cries `And I will show him my wrath.'

'My Lord!` At this point when I was telling the tale – I'd drop my voice and wave a crooked finger in the air. 'You ask such a thing? You do not know? The rich man I speak of... is ..... you.' Then I'd lumber about dramatically, snarling and cursing the class.

In my mind I *was* Nathan the prophet – complete with beard and bad breath. In theirs too, I had momentarily become him. Their female teacher had transmogrified into a prophet – or gone mad. But they remembered the story. And not only did they remember it, they used it, referred to it, let it enter their brain – and bang, a tiny bit of learning was 'done.' And all it had taken was a very old story and a teacher who is mostly a fool.

There is a tension in schools today. On the one hand it is drummed into us that learning has little to do with facts and things. Long gone are the days of my Latin exam when all I had to do was memorise a prepared passage and regurgitate it. That was not learning we are told. Learning has little to do with memory. In 1905 human knowledge was estimated to double every 100 years. Today it is every 12 months and soon it will be every 12 minutes. There is no chance of remembering much.

So – if it's not about memory – how else should our students learn? `Teach them how to learn' we are told. On the same principle that you give a village a goat rather than hand out food, you give a child the skills to foster lifelong learning.

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But then..... along come exams, and the tension appears. Because those children who have been taught *how* to learn are now being tested to an extent on *what* they have learned. If the story of Bathsheba is reduced to the mnemonic of a lady having a *bath (`Phew I remembered her name!`)* the learning has not been great. But if higher order thinking skills are being used, the student will be able to build on the story; she will analyse, synthesise and ultimately create, converting what *happened* into what it *meant* to have happened.

What it means for something to have happened is the preserve of the symbol and the story. It is the lifeblood of our discipline; the peculiar amalgamation of memory, imagination and empathy that fulfils the `learning from religion` objective as well as the `learning about...` It used to be thought that cognitive development (the higher order skills of Bloom's taxonomy) only come into play once the lower skills (remembering, sequencing etc) have been mastered. Although research suggests that it is not necessarily a seamlessly cumulative thing, this makes sense. My three year old nephew can 'do' *Is there Room on the Broom?* by heart, and his favourite game is to have us all be the actors. We start off with gusto – flying around on imaginary broomsticks and casting spells on the cat. But then disaster strikes. Sooner or later one of us forgets our lines, or is so obviously lumbering and *not* flying that the child dissolves into tears. The perfect story that he saw in his brain is never going to be there. He's at a transitional stage – locked in a place between worlds. In a few months time he will have mastered the cognitive skills to relax, ingest and move on. He will know that there is more Room on the Broom in his head then there will ever be anywhere else.

But what about the narratives of the Bible, the Quran – or indeed any other of our great religious texts? Stories abound, and communities are divided into where the boundaries of those stories lie. If Genesis 1 is a merely a story attesting to a God who creates and sustains, there is nothing at odds with evolution. The `story` is agile enough to contain our science – infinitely adaptable to the needs of the day. The resurrection of Lazarus is a Johannine paradigm we're told – the man lying in the darkness, curtailed by a deadening life – is not so dissimilar to any of us. The story is perennially pertinent to those who want to be raised. But what of the great central truths of the Bible? The facts on which faith is based? Whilst progressive Christians may doubt the Virgin Birth; the resurrection itself – whilst standing 'on the frontier of any possible language[1]' – is seen as in some sense 'true.' The 'some sense' caveat is of course very large; encompassing both those who attest to a physical act, and those who describe a `sense` of Christ's presence. And this is the nub of the matter. Because story – what it is and where it ends – is closely related to faith. And this is why an understanding of 'story' is absolutely central to the teaching of Religious Education – and indeed philosophy – if we are to get anywhere beyond a lower order thing; a fanaticism that clings to the text when the story is more than the words.

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The Greeks – of course – knew story. And they knew of its parent too. When Mnemosyne slept with Zeus she bore him nine magnificent offspring – among them Poetry, Music and Dance. The nine muses have been with us ever since, sitting on our creative shoulders and helping us learn for ourselves. But they are all the children of memory, so very precious to the precursors of the Greeks and indeed any civilisation before the introduction of the written word. Memory around the fire – recounting its stories, spinning its yarns, framing its values, beliefs and ambition for later civilisations to build on. It is disputed whether the works of Homer are of single authorship, but it seems probable that the Iliad and the Odyssey were part of an epic, oral cycle, with strong formulaic elements for the benefit of singer-poets. [2]Indeed, scholars think it is possible that the Greek alphabet itself was invented in order to 'write Homer down.' [3]

One of the things highlighted repeatedly in the assessment of Religious Education – especially in the UK – is the watering down of actual religious content. Aaqhil Ahmed – Head of Religion and Ethics at the BBC – recently made headlines when he pondered the religious illiteracy of the country. 'If you tried to make *The Life of Brian* today it would fall flat on its face because the vast majority of the audience would not get most of the jokes. They don't have the knowledge', he said.[4] And here is the tension I referred to earlier. Because the child who is writing about David and Bathsheba has to know the story in order to do something with it, and she has to understand the rules of the game. A story can be many things; historical truth, honest fable, disingenuous fiction, parable or special pleading – and only when she understands the quixotic nature of story-telling will she be able to judge what, in this particular case, the story is trying to say. And she might find it curiously appropriate that the prophet used a story to bring a king to his senses.

Religious Education thrives when the muses are invoked. As many as possible. Take another Biblical tale – used repeatedly in the exam hall to prove that Jesus was a forgiving sort of man and that we should therefore be forgiving also, and that generally we should all be nice. It is the story of the woman taken in adultery.

Kinaesthetic learners might dance this, visual learners draw. But let's take a picture and see where that takes us...

Breughel completed *Christ and the Women taken in Adultery* in 1565, but in many ways it could have been yesterday. The faces are timeless and expressive. Look closely at the painting – really look – and the student will start to see things she might not have seen before. The sternest face belongs not to a Jewish elder but instead to Jesus who bends to write in Dutch, 'He who is without sin .....' The elders themselves (to the right as befits the righteous) look shocked, unimpressed, affronted perhaps, whilst the crowd behind Jesus are distinctly more on his side. The woman appears amazed that someone should help her – but she is lavishly dressed. And the soldiers – they are amused, bored, just doing their jobs. They have no interest in a woman who might be stoned, or the sect that will do the stoning. It is not a centurion's problem.

The students might start to ask questions – why are his feet and hands so prominent? Why is he writing in dust? And if you invite them to place *themselves* in the picture, the

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learning might go to another level. It's at this point that an internal dialogue might begin to take place – What do I think about this? What would I have done about it, had I been there? Do I follow the rules or live by my conscience, and if so, how is that conscience informed?

The point I am making is very simple – that in order not to be religiously illiterate we do need to first know the stories, and in order not to be religiously obtuse we have to be able to question them. Only then can a student begin to take something away.

In this age of religious fundamentalism, it is absolutely incumbent on all of us that religion and the stories that it tells should not be marginalised in the curriculum. It may not – at first glance – appear to matter that we don't understand `The Life of Brian,` – but it really does. In a recent British Government survey, 35% of 15 year olds were not able to identify that the Nativity was a Biblical story, and a staggering 30% of parents could not locate the story of Adam and Eve.[5] If religion is pushed to the edge of learning we not only lose a cultural heritage so rich and tightly woven that it can literally never be replaced, but we gain in its place a nervous embarrassment that is anathema to the freedoms we value. The way to combat both fundamentalism and indifference is to start discussing the stories with our full intelligence and 21st century minds. The stories are equal to the challenge, and beyond their own truths, will equip our students to understand Shakespeare, Caravaggio, TS Eliot and JS Bach, to name a few.

RE is a special discipline. According to the UK Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, the pupil who is gifted and talented in our field may 'be surprisingly insightful and discerning, be sensitive to and aware of the mystery of life and have a feeling for how these mysteries are explored and expressed.'[6] The nine children of the Goddess are all over this statement; without art, symbol and story the discipline would barely exist. And without art, symbol and story perhaps it shouldn't. Take the stories away and you are left with....what? A fevered, defensive literalism that clings to itself – and brooks no discussion of its stories – or the kind of mindset that is implacable in the face of mystery and Truth and much the poorer for it.

Let's return to literature. The great GK Chesterton wrote 'Literature is a luxury; fiction is a necessity,' and his saying – in the way of all good maxims – bounds around inside us. It has the ring of something slippery and hard to pin down and it challenges our assumptions. `Of course literature *contains* fiction,` the inventor of Father Brown might have gone on to say, and left it hanging there. And I do wonder whether, in part, he was talking of the deep internal fictions with which we construct ourselves – and in many ways, shape our lives. Again: the necessity of fiction.

There flowed five majestic rivers in the great Greek After World. When souls drank from the River Lethe, they forgot their lives and were free to return – once more – to earth. Inhabiting new bodies, the reincarnated souls lived again – unaware of all they had been. But certain souls drank, not from Lethe, but from the deep, dark pool of Mnemosyne the Goddess. It was Mnemosyne (memory) that would save them – tasting their mistakes, reliving their glories. Only having drunk did they have access to the narrative of a life that was complete and fully formed. And only then were they free *not* to return.

We would do well to drink from Mnemosyne. And it would be good to keep telling our stories. We should be mindful of the nature of story – it's deep, dark, richness – its mystery and its ability to reproduce. Some of the best healing dreams are the Jungian ones – the scene in the depth of the night where everything is resolved in the absolute certainty of a mind that is given over to story. It is what faith is. It is where healing comes from. It is one of our greatest assets and one of our most dangerous toys. Stories – especially where belief is involved – should be wisely created and used.

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Endnotes

1 Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, Pilgrim Press, 2003

2 Adam Parry (ed.) *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1987.

3 Signs of Meaning" *Science* 324, 3 April 2009, p.38, reviewing Powell's *Writing* and citing Powell's *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet,* CUP 1991.

4 Aaqhil Ahmed, *The Independent*, 18 October 2013.

5 YouGov, January 2013.

6 www.qca.org.uk (Historial)