

## Religion, Reductionism and Pedagogical Reduction

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### Abstract

This chapter addresses some theoretical questions around educational representation. How are we to encourage others to develop a rich understanding of religion(s)? What is involved in the selections and simplifications of religious traditions for educational purposes, and how are these generalisations and constructions justified? This chapter addresses these questions by developing and applying a theory of *pedagogical reduction*. I contrast the educationally constructive notion of pedagogical reduction to what is often taken to be problematic in understanding religion, namely *reductionism*. I propose that understanding religion entails the complex pedagogical practices of the give and take of pedagogical reduction.

### Keywords

Pedagogical reduction; reductionism; representation; world religions paradigm; pedagogical tact

### Introduction

This chapter addresses some theoretical questions around the educational representation of religion in general and religions in particular. How are we to encourage others to develop a rich understanding of the concept of religion? How ought we to teach children about complex and diverse religious traditions in an age of religious pluralism and multiculturalism as well as conflict and misrepresentation (Masuzawa 2005)? What is involved in the selections and simplifications of religious traditions for educational purposes and how do these generalisations rely on a general construction of religion? How are those selections, simplifications and constructions justified? Can reductive representations such as the ‘World Religions Paradigm’ (Cotter and Robertson 2016) really offer a balanced view of our diverse religious experiences and traditions, or do they distort and misrepresent? This chapter

addresses these questions by developing and applying a theory of pedagogical reduction. I contrast the educationally constructive notion of pedagogical reduction to what is often taken to be a problematic approach to understanding religion, namely *reductionism*. How can an educationally constructive reduction deal with the dangers of reductionism? My argument moves through four main steps. First, I define reductionism in general and raise the question of how much reduction is too much when it comes to representing religion. Second, I elaborate the concept of the *pedagogical reduction* which, in short, concerns the way complex and wide-ranging phenomena are represented in simple forms for educational purposes. This is followed by an exploration of how Religious Education and Religious Studies exhibit particular kinds of tension and ambivalence in relation to pedagogical reduction, finally leading to some theoretical and practical considerations around how pedagogical reductions require the development of certain educational dispositions, specifically illustrated through the notion of pedagogical tact.

## 1. Reductionism

In the field of Religious Studies, reductionism has a long and chequered history (Idinopulos and Yonan 1993; Segal 1983). We can broadly characterise reductive theories of religion as displaying two explanatory tendencies: naturalistic and cultural reductionism (Flood 2011). Both natural and cultural theorising reduce religious phenomena and experience by imposing interpretive frames, the former through explaining phenomena in terms of more basic physical structures (e.g. neurochemistry), the latter in terms of more basic structures of power (e.g. Marxian critique). There are no conclusive means of determining whether, and to what extent, interpretive frames reveal or conceal. In general, it seems likely that the act of understanding through reductive framing of phenomena is ambivalent, and so we might acknowledge that, as Heidegger put it, every revealing is a concealing (Heidegger 1977). From this perspective, neurochemical or Marxist interpretations of religious experiences and attitudes are not simply true or false, but show something while obscuring something else. Acknowledging that we find ourselves within a hermeneutic circle, means that our interpretations and understandings are always provisional: they show something without every exhausting what can be shown.

Yet reductionism becomes problematic when certain phenomena (e.g. consciousness; religious experience; free will) are thought to be conclusively explained as epiphenomena:

that the reality of the phenomena can be sufficiently explained by reference to basic constituents (e.g. neurochemistry or hegemony) and that the lived experience is illusory (Gallagher 2006) or false consciousness. This kind of reductionism does not let the phenomena show itself as itself and has been roundly criticised by theorists particularly within phenomenology and hermeneutics (e.g. Gallagher 2018; Dreyfus 1992). In the context of Religious Education and Religious Studies,<sup>1</sup> reductionism is evident in the arguably hegemonic dominance of what is known as the ‘World Religions Paradigm’ (WRP); a way of interpreting, representing and teaching religion that emerged in the 1960’s, particularly in the United Kingdom. This WRP has been characterised by Cotter and Robertson as follows:

The WRP typically includes ‘the Big Five’ (where does that term come from?) of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism – and moreover almost always presented in that Abrahamocentric order – increasingly with additional ‘catch-all’ categories such as ‘indigenous religions’ or ‘new religions’ included (Cotter and Robertson, 2).

The WRP allows for a relatively systematic representation of religion in the face of religious pluralism and multiculturalism. But what are the benefits and what the costs of this systematic representation? Scholars of Religious Studies have sought ways to develop broader understandings of diverse religious traditions expanding the discipline of Religious Studies well beyond the constraints of (confessional) Theology (Smart 1996). Some have interpreted the WRP as broadening the previously hegemonic and univocal confessional approach taken by religious educators. These changes had considerable influence over how schools, colleges and universities represent diverse religious traditions within Religious Education and Religious Studies. More recently, others have argued that understanding religion in contemporary RE and RS often pays the price of being excessive reductive: teachers of RE and RS tend to interpret and represent complex and diverse traditions through the narrow lenses derived from, most often, Western Protestant Christian religion (Smith 1978; Harvey 2013). In short, WRP has been criticised as too reductionistic (Owen 2011). And yet, scholars have pointed to the necessity for something akin to a world religions approach, but that this should not be undertaken uncritically (Cotter and Robertson 2016). So, although Cotter and Robertson’s book presents a range of criticisms levelled at the WRP

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I use Religious Education (RE) to refer to teaching of/about religion in schools and colleges, and Religious Studies (RS) to refer to teaching of/about religion in universities.

itself as being hegemonic and reductive, it also acknowledges the practical necessity for representation. From a hermeneutic perspective, these competing views of the WRP tell us something about the rich and complex field of religion, without exhausting the subject.

In what follows I develop something like this latter view that, although representation is always partial, it is educationally vital and constructive. This educationally constructive pedagogical reduction should not, I suggest, be confused with reductionism. The distinction I wish to make is between a problematic *reductionism* which sees the representation of phenomena as necessary and sufficient for complete understanding, and a *pedagogical reduction* which is necessary but never sufficient. I believe that this distinction is particularly significant for RE/RS because the ‘content’ of RE/RS can often be oriented to something that ostensibly and explicitly exceeds representation. Indeed, scholars and practitioners of religion regard the notion of representation with a degree of ambivalence not found in all curricula domains.<sup>2</sup> This means that in RE/RS educators are especially concerned to avoid the pitfalls of reductionism, but without a clear sense of what and how to reduce their subject matter in educational ways without falling into reductionism which, by definition cannot be very educational. Although I do not claim to offer substantive criteria for distinguishing reductionism and pedagogical reduction, my argument unfolds some conceptual resources designed to help us to reflect on, articulate, and usefully enact this distinction (see also Lewin 2020).

## 2. Pedagogical Reduction

One of the fundamental questions educators must consider is one of educational representation: how is the complexity of things to be made understandable to the next generation? Much of what we call education, that is, the acts of presenting and representing the world,<sup>3</sup> could be boiled down to the efforts to draw the attention of students to particular

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<sup>2</sup> Critical questions around representation also exist in geography, history and other social or human sciences, but the so-called physical and mathematical sciences appear to be less obviously bound to particular social and historical narratives. This is complex, however, since it can be argued that any kind of representation entails the exercise of power.

<sup>3</sup> Much of what follows builds upon the distinction between presentation and representation made by Mollenhauer (2013).

things, efforts which involve various forms of selection and simplification aimed, generally speaking, towards something rather mysterious, even miraculous:<sup>4</sup> namely ‘understanding’. These efforts to draw attention include activities such as selecting, simplifying, generalising, and using examples, which taken together are directed towards the creation of conditions for learning, development or growth. This variety of activities undertaken to represent the complexity of the world for educational purposes is here referred to as *pedagogical reduction*. So, reduction refers to the activities that ‘reduce’ (the ‘how’) but also to the resulting representations that might be called ‘reductions’ (the ‘what’), for instance, the summary of a subject field into a textbook chapter. Although the processes of pedagogical reduction are activities that most, if not all, educators would recognise, there is relatively little theory of educational representation and reduction among Anglo-American educational theorists.<sup>5</sup> Considerations of the similar Germanic notion of ‘didactic reduction’ (*Didaktische Reduktion*) seem to be largely absent within Anglo-American educational theory perhaps because of the paternalistic connotations of ‘didactics’. Although criticisms of the particular forms that pedagogical reductions take are appropriate, my approach here affirms the intrinsic value of examining the general structure of pedagogical reduction (Lewin 2019). I seek to explore the concept of pedagogical(-didactical) reduction primarily in descriptive terms, that is, without immediately engaging in normative critiques of the validity of certain reductions. This is not meant to suggest that such critiques are not significant or worthwhile. On the contrary, critical theory is of vital significance to educational representation. But I suggest that before (or perhaps after) critique (see Vlieghe and Zamojski 2019), we must have some notion of what it is we wish to critique.

If it is true that most educators recognise selection, simplification and so on, why does it matter if they lack a theory? As already suggested, it is not the case that theoretical discourse around pedagogical representation is entirely lacking, but that such theory tends to move directly to forms of critique: progressive and critical pedagogues are prone to focus analysis on normative questions of the failures of representation, from critical analysis of whose interests govern pedagogical representations, to how we should avoid constructing

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<sup>4</sup> Gadamer calls it the miracle of understanding: “The task of hermeneutics is to clarify this miracle of understanding, which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning” (Gadamer 2002, 292).

<sup>5</sup> Reference to the concept of reduction can be found here and there. For instance, Dewey writes that “[t]he inequality of achievement between the mature and the immature not only necessitates teaching the young, but the necessity of this teaching gives an immense stimulus to reducing experience to that order and form which will render it most easily communicable and hence most usable” (Dewey 1916, 7).

inauthentic educational realities disconnected from a putative real world. For instance, a hermeneutics of suspicion is applied to the interests that govern the structure and content of textbooks (Apple 2014). Although critical attitudes are often appropriate, especially where the education of adults is involved, I argue that the impact of the absence of a more general theory of pedagogical reduction is that insufficient attention is paid to the appropriate nature and scope of pedagogical reduction. In other words, while critics are apt to point out that the content of a particular curriculum is complex and contested, often representing unacknowledged and prejudiced canonical interests, there is seldom an explicit recognition and justification of the need for pedagogical reduction *per se*. This leaves educators with, so to speak, one arm tied behind their backs: they must consider pedagogical relations and processes, attempting as they do to create conditions for growth, but are unsure of how the restrictions (and reductions) that constitute educational ‘spaces’ can make positive contributions to the construction of those conditions. Moreover, there are the twin pressures of progressive education commanding educators to abandon the inauthentic or reduced forms, versus so-called traditional educators demanding a return to the whole within sufficient consciousness concerning whose interests govern that whole. Understanding pedagogical practices of (both literally and metaphorically) fencing off experiences in children’s nurseries, for instance, or understanding the need to ‘suspend’ the temporalities of instrumentalism within the school (Masschelein and Simons 2013), can help educators to theorise as well as to practice pedagogical reduction well. I wish to highlight the specifically *educational* questions of pedagogical reduction that I believe are primary. Only in the wake of such a general analysis (i.e. general didactics) are we in a position to engage in critique of the particular forms (i.e. special didactics).

Although the concept of reduction describes conditions of constraint – the limiting structures of selection and simplification, as well as the literal constraints of space and time that classrooms and timetables bring about – it is also generative or productive, since these constraining conditions simultaneously bring things into view. To borrow a metaphor from Robert Macfarlane, the reduction is understood less as a perimeter that restricts, “but an aperture: a space through which the world can be seen” (Shepherd 2014, xiii). The term is used both as a verb (to reduce something by making it smaller or simpler) and as a noun (the object, space or moment that has been reduced). Containing the verb stem *educere* which literally means to “draw out, extract; branch out” (Online Etymology Dictionary 2019), the etymology refers to the idea of “bringing back, or restoring,” employing *ducere*, meaning “bring, or lead out”. Thus, to *reduce*, to *educere* and to *educate*, all connote drawing or

bringing something out. By drawing attention, education is a generative reduction of the world which draws out through constraint. This emphasises the verbal process, but I also want to keep in mind that reduction is a helpful term for the objects that result from the process. Textbooks are probably the paradigmatic form of the pedagogical reduction, since it is here that a subject field is represented in condensed form and simplified for the purposes of developing an understanding of a field. It is not only through texts and images that are representations deployed. Museums, galleries and exhibitions use light and space in certain ways, drawing attention to certain things with pedagogical intention; children's toys often present elements of the world in miniature, again with at least partial pedagogical or developmental interests; children's moral tales are often designed to simplify complex ethical or social dilemmas, or to sanitise darker instincts with formative influence in mind (Lewin 2020). These and other forms of intentional reduction are everywhere in education. Two developed examples will suffice: one unconventional, the child's balance bike, and a second more conventional, the textbook.

Balance bikes are typically small bikes without gears, pedals, and often brakes and have become very popular in recent years. Although something like the balance bike has existed nearly as long as cycling itself, the modern form of the balance bike has become popular as the process of learning to ride a bike has evolved. Learning to ride is often understood to build upon the fundamental skills of balance and steering. Once they are developed, then other skills like pedalling, braking, and gears, can become the focus. Prior to the development of the balance bike, stabilisers (also known as training wheels) were (and still are) commonly used, though increasingly it is recognised that to remove the element of balance from the early stages of learning to ride, is counter-productive (Becker and Jenny 2017; Rochmann 2011). Clearly both kinds of training bike embody pedagogical reduction, but the use of stabilisers is arguably not as effective as using a balance bike for the intended purpose (learning to ride a bike). In either case, these bikes are used to simplify by breaking down a complex activity into constituent parts that are presented in a staged manner.

It is more common to recognise the pedagogical representations and reductions of more 'bookish' forms of knowledge. For instance, Daniel Tröhler distinguishes between a kind of academic or research knowledge, from pedagogical knowledge. Research knowledge is generated by questioning existing knowledge using verifiable scientific methods, resulting in new, but still provisional knowledge. This kind of knowledge is contrasted with pedagogical knowledge whose chief characteristic is to be "combined, arranged and structured for the purpose of effective teaching" (Tröhler 2008, 79). The presentation of

pedagogical knowledge, often in textbook form, follows certain principles: the knowledge is stable, not provisional or contested; exceptions and contradictions are avoided; elements are presented in discrete parts or units; the presentation itself is often attractive or entertaining in some way. In summary, this involves “[s]election, condensation, composition, didactical structuring and streamlining for classroom instruction” (Tröhler 2008, 79). This distinction between research and pedagogical knowledge can be overstated: one must keep in mind that as soon as one attempts to communicate research findings in journal articles and ‘academic’ texts, one is (one hopes!) thinking about how to clearly and persuasively present an argument, and so questions of pedagogical representation attend any consideration of research ‘knowledge exchange’. Conversely, pedagogical knowledge is not disconnected from research knowledge as though it is only concerned with the practicalities of effective communication: even pedagogical knowledge is about something actual. Nevertheless, the distinction is useful and visible in all sorts of contexts. Tröhler goes on to discuss the Heidelberg Catechism, a Protestant confessional document published a few decades after Luther’s publication of the 95 theses, as “a prime example of an educational work or ‘textbook’ that treats knowledge pedagogically” (Tröhler 2008, 81), and which illustrates so well the principles of pedagogical reduction particularly in reference to Religious Education.

Published in 1563, the Heidelberg Catechism is said to have been the most popular text of the sixteenth century, at least in the Western World (Tröhler 2008, 81). Whether the primary intentions of its authors were pedagogical or ecumenical (and how far these intentions can be disentangled) is debatable (Dreyer 2014; Bierma 2005). But this Lutheran catechetical form – a series of questions with orthodox responses – captures the elements of pedagogical reduction: it ensures some general theological consistency in a volatile age of reformation and counter-reformation. The way that the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary website presents this Catechism is instructive:

The Catechism summarizes the major teachings of Holy Scripture in one hundred and twenty-nine memorable questions and answers. Simple yet profound, as well as concise yet sufficient, the Catechism has been appreciated by young and old alike as one of the most clear, helpful and comforting guides into all the spiritual treasures of the holy gospel (An Ageless Summary of an Everlasting Comfort 2019).

The Catechism has been represented in so many visual forms because it distils the essence of the gospel, it elides theological controversies, and it attempts to meet the student where he or she is through forming questions that, it is supposed, exist within the reader.

Note the surprising claim that the Catechism is ‘sufficient’. As discussed earlier, the definition of a problematic kind of reductionism is related to the fact that the representation is thought to be sufficient. In general, sufficiency refers to the idea that nothing else is required, that the account is complete. Could the Heidelberg Catechism really be sufficient? It is clear that reduction is not a substitute for the Bible: “[T]he Catechism is not a replacement for Scripture. It is meant to lead you deeper into the Word of God, not draw you away from it” (An Ageless Summary of an Everlasting Comfort 2019). One might argue that its sufficiency is not meant literally, but pedagogically: the statement of sufficiency might be intended to draw attention to the Catechism as a first step along a path that ultimately leads to Scripture itself. The Catechism is not Scripture but is something like a pedagogical representation and reduction of it. This raises the thorny issue of the relation between the representation and what is represented, not only in RE, but generally. After all, is not the reductive model of the physical brain only that: a model rather than the thing itself? We are always working within the realm of representation, it would seem. It would also seem that the initial definitions of reductionism require further analysis. A wider discussion of the nature of scientific reductionism is beyond my scope, but the form of the Heidelberg Catechism suggests that something pedagogical is intended here: that Scripture is itself complex, open to varied interpretation (risking heresy), and perhaps inaccessible to some. But with the idea of making a pedagogical reduction of Scripture, we are faced with tensions: does the reduction risk *misrepresentation*? Is it not preferable to present students with the uninterpreted ‘primary texts’? Are representations really necessary? Aren’t textbook reductions too often used to elide or defer the real encounter with the substance of the curriculum perhaps because we think too little of the students, or too much of ourselves? Don’t textbooks create a false scholastic (or educational) reality (Masschelein and Simons 2013), what progressive educators might decry as an inauthentic educational space? More dramatically, don’t textbooks occasionally get things quite wrong, or often intentionally misrepresent the facts to suit ideological interests (Apple 2014)? While it may be tempting to oppose textbook (or other) reductions on these grounds, these concerns arise through an over-simplification of the opposition between the textbook representation and the ‘real’ or primary sources. The history of pedagogical representation illustrates well these issues.

It has been widely argued that one of the key conditions that gave rise to the Protestant Reformation and so the Catechism was the printing press (see Postman 1995, Chapter 2). This period of transformation also led, in 1658, to the publication of a key text in the history of pedagogical representation and reduction, often understood as the first textbook

for children: John Comenius' *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (*The Visible World in Pictures*). This text is important because it is arguably one of the last attempts to encompass and represent the whole cosmos (including things invisible) into a single pedagogical work: the 'textbook' form of pedagogical reduction, we might say. Subsequent efforts towards encyclopaedism had to confront the increasing challenges of a cosmos 'unmade' (Randles 1999) – without the binding force and order of the great chain of being – and with the increasing knowledge brought into view by the new philosophers. As these complex changes unfolded, it has been argued that they created the conditions for the early constructions of childhood (Postman 1995), constructions that themselves led to the need for the self-conscious pedagogical reduction of the world. It is at this point, argues Mollenhauer (2013), that we see children not just being present to an adult world, but that the world is self-consciously re-presented to children by way of pedagogical reductions. Furthermore, Mollenhauer refers to the associated idea that schools and classrooms became places for *pedagogical rehearsal*: educational places are not 'real world' since they are precisely set apart in order to offer students the opportunity to rehearse complex actions, knowledges, and attitudes before they are performed for 'real.' These processes of and spaces for representation, reduction and rehearsal are vital in positioning pedagogical reductions within the broader sweep of educational history.

So, we see that the idea of pedagogical reduction applies to secular teaching materials such as general textbooks and schemes of work, all of which are involved in making selections from fields of knowledge in order to give material form to subject domains. Educators make judgements about the kinds of interpretation of phenomena that most effectively support the students, and the sequence in which those representations are best presented, by providing select narratives, and examples.<sup>6</sup> Other principles are at play here, but I hope to have given a plausible account of the idea that interpretive representation is necessary, and that there are reasons to call this a process of reduction. Not only is this kind of reductive interpretation necessary, but it is a constructive and formative process: it is precisely through the aperture of the reduction that something can come into view at all. I now want to discuss similar issues with the idea of reduction particularly in the context of religion and RS/RE, issues that the example of the Catechism has already anticipated.

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<sup>6</sup> Although the concept of the exemplary is also not widely discussed in educational theory, there is more work here: see, for instance, Dahlbeck and Korsgaard (2020). Wolfgang Klafki and Martin Wagenschein have developed influential *didactic* analyses which focus on the exemplary (Klafki 2015; Wagenschein 2015).

### 3. Reduction(ism) in Religious Education

In the context of interpreting religion, reduction has a bad name. It is quite common for theories of religion to be negatively characterised as reductive: Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, or James Frazer being cases in point. Here religion is framed as the epiphenomena of the real economic, psychological or historical forces at work. However, in debates of religion (and other issues), calling something you don't like "reductionist" seems like an inadequate strategy that has probably had its day, since any general process of scientific reasoning depends upon some elements of generalisation. Occam's razor, for instance, is properly reductive. As discussed in the previous section, it is not reduction in itself that is the problem, but rather how it is deployed and how complete the reduction is thought to be: to anticipate the discussion that follows, the concept of pedagogical reduction does not only concern the curriculum content, but also the process by which that curriculum is made present. In other words, it is not just about what, but also about *how* the world is reduced.

The desire of so-called phenomenologists of religion, like Max Scheler, Mircea Eliade, Rudolf Otto, and Ninian Smart, to allow the phenomena of religion to speak for themselves, or for some version of Clifford Geertz's thick description to be methodologically predominant does not ultimately let us off the reductive hook, since interpretation is not eliminated by thickening our descriptions and accounts, or by attempting to be purely descriptive. Without getting into a developed discussion of the relationship between phenomenology and hermeneutics, let me simply say that the view I am taking here is that there is no uninterpreted phenomena to which we can refer: as soon as reference is made, then also interpretation is made. (There might be uninterpreted phenomena to which we cannot refer, allowing it, then to remain uninterpreted, but reference to that would entail a paradox!).

I earlier suggested that reductionism sees the representation of phenomena as necessary and sufficient for complete understanding, while from the perspective of pedagogical reduction the representation of phenomena is necessary but never complete. When we turn to the pedagogical reduction of religion, we can see how these two tendencies bring about a particular tension. In this paper I can only make some brief remarks about this so let me suggest that there are two general forces at work in the re-presentation of religion. On the one hand calls for greater religious literacy are underpinned by a desire to ensure that diverse religious traditions and communities are understood in all their complexity and richness (Dinham and Francis 2015; Shaw 2019). Here University Professors of Religious

Studies, like Jonathan Z. Smith are troubled by the reductive representations enacted through the world religions paradigm so common to RS and RE (Smith 1978). On the other hand, ‘understanding religion’ entails some form of simplification, generalisation and representation. This dichotomy is played out in various ways, but the point of my argument is that a theory of pedagogical reduction would help us make more considered choices concerning the ways religions are interpreted and represented pedagogically.

The scholars of Religious Studies often emphasise the complexity of religious traditions, showing them not to be uniform and singular entities with clear cut boundaries and definitive distinguishing features. Definitions are provisional, arguments historically framed, and religions thereby must be understood as internally pluralistic, contested, with porous boundaries, and involving immanent critique. In other words, it has become orthodox to point out that there is no singular and discrete Christianity, Islam, Judaism and so on, rather there are multiple forms of any tradition each being historically, socially, geographically, and culturally formed and inflected. Not only is there pluralism within religious traditions, but that pluralism shows that the lines between orthodoxy and heterodoxy are themselves historically framed and constructed.

The recognition of this complexity presents systematic analysis of religion with various problems, most particularly, of course, the problem of determining the nature of the subject matter: what does and does not count as a *religion*. Do the beliefs and practices that fall under the general rubric of Hinduism constitute a ‘religion’ (Flood 1996)? To what extent do the principles and practices of Confucianism define it as a religion (Fan 2011)? How are forms of Christian atheism or humanist spirituality positioned among the general questions of understanding religion? Some of these discussions might be interpreted in terms of Tröhler’s research knowledge rather than pedagogical knowledge, but these are academic questions which bear upon the ways in which religious ideas are presented pedagogically. Here we must admit that the distinction between academic and pedagogical knowledge is itself fluid. The desire to correct a simplistic view of Hinduism is both academic and pedagogical in the terms presented by Tröhler. That we might want to include Confucianism or forms of Humanism in theories of religion, reflect changing social and political priorities. It seems likely that these interpretations of Hinduism or Confucianism, for instance, are determined by political interests: for instance, it is hardly surprising that contemporary neo-Confucianism is quite clearly not associated with conventional religion in China’s contemporary self-understanding, and that therefore Confucianism is reinterpreted aesthetically rather than religiously. So, if I am to make a case for the pedagogical reduction of religion, I cannot

imagine that conventional forms of RE, and the reductions they employ, are without prejudice. On the other hand, it should be clear that I am not making a case for leaving the prejudices of contemporary RE unexamined. On the contrary, the examination of those prejudices precisely depends upon a better articulated theory of pedagogical reduction so that the interests governing the pedagogical reduction are made explicit so that different, better informed interpretations might also be in view. If a good deal of the scholarship is undertaken by European and American scholars (even more particularly, white men within those contexts) then the pedagogical reductions are likely to reflect certain perceptions of, and assumptions about, the world. The ways in which Hindu religious traditions and practices, or indigenous forms of religious life in First Nations communities of North America, are framed by religious categories imported from broadly Christian intellectual traditions has been noted by scholars of religion (Lewin 2016). So surely some historical consciousness on the part of the interpreters is desirable if we are to do better in terms of how inclusive we can be with our interpretive re-presentations of religion.

#### 4. Pedagogical reduction in the representation of religion

So, on the one hand we can be justifiably circumspect about generalising and presenting religious phenomena in reductive ways, while on the other hand, we must accept that pedagogy is intrinsically interpretive, and therefore reductive. Indeed, I have argued that this is not only an unfortunate necessity but is the very possibility of showing the world at all. I have noted that reduction is both a process (of reducing) and a product (the selected/simplified object). Thus, speaking educationally, reduction involves consideration of *how* to re-present the world, and *what* to select from the world. I believe we need to consider not only the extent to which the curriculum content fairly represents a given subject matter, we must also consider how that ‘content’ is made present in the practices of education. For this reason, the next step in my argument considers how we make judgements about the appropriateness of reduction of religion by introducing the concept of *pedagogical tact*, a kind of practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Pedagogical tact is a faculty that bears upon all aspects of education, including representation, and encourages practitioners to consider and reflect upon the relations between theoretical understanding of pedagogy, experience of educating, and reflection on experience (van Manen 1992; Friesen & Osguthorpe 2017). Pedagogical tact describes the practical insight concerning how to use (among other things) pedagogical representations and reductions in ways that involve *give and take*. Because of the ambivalent

nature of pedagogical reduction (that it both reveals and conceals) it is vital that educators pay attention to the students' relation to it in order to determine when to give and to take any particular pedagogical representation and reduction. The practical emphasis of pedagogical tact means there can be no universal rule for its application, and therefore no universal rules for how to reduce phenomena, or how to employ any particular pedagogical reduction, because educational representation involves the complex interaction between the conditions of learning set up by a teacher (which includes re-presenting phenomena) and the particular approach, experience and disposition of the student. The question of the accuracy of a representation is incomplete where it does not also take account of the disposition and capacity of the learner (i.e. *Bildsamkeit*: see Mollenhauer, 2013), something that educators do all the time, more or less reflectively, in their planning and practice. Representations can be understood as relational, and are, therefore, always enacted within the complex practices of education. The idea of a complete representation is not only theoretically implausible, but it fails to consider the practical relations between educator and student. The basic principle here is familiar to most teachers: that good teaching entails attention to all sorts of spatial, temporal and curricula conditions for growth, which also means employing the appropriate reduction at the right moment, taking account of all the contextual factors including the disposition(s) of the student(s).

But I want to take these observations about the proper place of reduction in RE one step further because although reduction is a general feature of education, it has particular implications if we consider the referent of RE. In other words, what are the pedagogical reductions of RE drawing attention to? What is the 'curriculum content' of RE? How do we represent that subject matter? It is not at all obvious what we are drawing attention to in RE, and any statement I make on this matter would elide the contested nature of the answer that I could give. In the context of the Catechism, attention is drawn to the gospel, but even this statement is ambiguous, for it is not clear whether the gospel here refers to the Biblical text, or Christ himself as the word of God. In other words, does the pedagogical reduction draw the student's attention to another representation, or to some other referent, something that exceeds representation (whatever that might mean)? On the one hand, this is an issue of what RE is for: we might interpret RE simply in terms of the knowledge about various different religious traditions, where students are encouraged to understand the experiences, practices and beliefs of communities as social and cultural phenomena. In this respect, notwithstanding all the issues discussed thus far, RE shares the general problem of reduction with all other areas of the curriculum. Insofar as it is a general pedagogical issue, then one answer is to

acknowledge that the quest for ‘completeness’ of experience or content is unhelpful when it comes to understanding religion (or anything else, for that matter), since it is impossible to learn about all religious traditions in ways that are anything other than superficial. For this reason, Wagenschein warns against the temptation of completeness arguing that we must offer exemplary forms (Wagenschein 2014). This might mean departing from, or deconstructing, the construction of the big 5 religions since sticking to the conventional approach might mean that students are not encouraged to go outside of their comfort zones or encouraged to look at margins. It may be that examination of the marginal forms of religious identity (e.g. Wicca or Jediism) will have far greater pedagogical resonance than any standard approach.

But often RE is said to seek something more: something like an existential encounter with something, or, as RE practitioners in England and Wales are aware, the concept of not only ‘learning about,’ but also ‘learning from’ religion (Engebretson 2009). This seems to raise the intractable question of theological representation and mediation, itself the fulcrum on which the transformations of the Reformation turned. If we do wish to pursue this line in RE, then I would argue that the *theological* reference point for academic knowledge and pedagogical knowledge can only be referred to in complex, ambivalent, and ultimately insufficient ways, and so these forms of knowledge share a fundamental condition of insufficiency and uncertainty. Reference to the sufficient nature of the catechism must, then be interpreted pedagogically (or, more generally performatively), rather than literally. It is for this reason, that many religious traditions have attempted to subvert the terms which are used to mediate the theological reference point: by suggesting that what is posited by theology as god-talk, must also be undone by way of the *via negativa*.

This seems to rely on a notion of RE as being basically confessional which, no doubt, many would question. Yet, any straightforward distinction between confessional and non-confessional RE is itself a simplification (a reduction) that can’t be generally applied. What it means to *understand* the phenomena of religion requires, I argue, a sense of the meaning of the religion which begins to erode the distinction between confessional and non-confessional RE. In brief, the secular ‘neutral’ framing of religions is by no means a perspective from nowhere: it enacts its own logic of what ‘understanding’ is (Lewin 2016). Like any pedagogical reduction, this secular reduction can be given, but also must be taken, as part of the dialectics of religious understanding, a kind of *via negativa*.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to apply a general theory of pedagogical reduction to the field of RS/RE, a field in which concerns around explanatory reductionism lead to a general suspicion of pedagogical reduction more broadly. I have argued that although reflection on the criteria governing pedagogical reduction is essential for avoiding misrepresentation, we cannot avoid reduction itself: that pedagogical reduction must be distinguished from reductionism. My goal has been to consider the process of understanding the theories and practices, as well as the scope and limits of pedagogical reduction; that is, the art of forming, giving and taking those reductions appropriately in part through the practices of pedagogical tact. The point of pedagogical tact is not to offer general criteria for knowing what good application of tact looks like, since, by definition, tact involves the particular case, not the general rules. It is about developing an awareness of when and how to apply the general principles of (in this instance) pedagogical reduction. This raises further questions of how pedagogical tact can be reliably developed in educators, a question that I have no simple answer for, but which suggests a complex discussion of the relation between theory and practice (Lewis 2018; Somr & Hrušková, 2014).

The art of giving and taking representations is something that religions, in general, have contemplated for a very long time, and they offer forms of discourse and practices of contemplation (such as the *via negativa*, or the aesthetics of religious life) that allow for more flexible notions of representation. For this reason, I argue that dialogue between religious and pedagogical histories would be fruitful in understanding, reflecting upon, and enacting pedagogical reductions.

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