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Hinduism and Religious Education

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Hinduism and Religious Education

Catherine Robinson

This article concentrates on England as a case study of Hinduism and Religious Education (→ [Britischer Religionsunterricht](#)), as it provides an insight into reasons for teaching Hinduism and the variety of ways the tradition can be taught.

1. Legal and Institutional Context

There are many reasons to teach Hinduism. In England and Wales, one reason is the legal obligation for any new Locally Agreed Syllabus to “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” (Education Reform Act, 1988, 1.8(3)). Since there is a substantial Hindu community, amounting to 1.5% of the population according to the 2011 census (Office for National Statistics, 2012), Hinduism is normally regarded as one of the so-called Big Six religions that should be taken into account in formulating these Locally Agreed Syllabuses.

More generally, the presence of a Hindu minority means that it is important to teach Hinduism in order to promote tolerance and understanding. This involves both acknowledging the identities and experiences of Hindu pupils, and preparing all pupils for the challenges and opportunities of a plural society and a globalised world. In addition, a strong case can be made for teaching Hinduism simply on educational grounds. For example, as one of the Dharmic faiths, along with Buddhism and Sikhism, Hinduism demonstrates that the dominant model of religion derives from Christianity and relates best to Abrahamic faiths. It does so explicitly, when the concept of religion and its applicability to Hinduism are examined, and implicitly, when topics that reveal the range and scope of Hinduism are investigated. Further, Hinduism provides material for academic reflection on points of comparison and contrast between religions. Moreover, it offers inspiration as a source of wisdom for pupils' personal development.

Even so, there have been tensions over whether and, if so, when to teach religions other than Christianity that historically has been the dominant religion. Notwithstanding such tensions, Hinduism does feature in the curriculum and not only for secondary school pupils but also for primary school pupils. *Awareness, Mystery and Value*, a Locally Agreed Syllabus for use in state-funded community schools (though these syllabuses may now be used by other schools such as academies), illustrates how Hinduism may be treated. Pupils may be introduced to Hinduism in their early years in education (up to the age of seven years) but will learn about Hinduism in their later primary education (aged seven to 11 years). Again, pupils may learn more about Hinduism at some point in their secondary education (aged 11 to 16 years) (Syllabus at *Awareness, Mystery and Value* website).

There are optional papers on Hinduism in examinations taken by students aged 16 years, and aged 18 years, both of which have been significantly revised in recent years. The topics specified for GCSE papers taken by 16 year olds include beliefs about ultimate reality and the divine, human nature and destiny, and the world and matter, and varied forms of practice encompassing worship and meditation, festival and pilgrimage, and the existence of different paths to liberation, with some coverage of important questions of truth, meaning and value and contemporary issues such as the environment and gender, alongside aspects of diversity and Hindu life in Britain (AQA, 2016b, 15-17; Edexcel, 2016, 36-38; OCR, 2016, 38-44;75-81; WJECb, 2016, 13;19;25;31;39f.). A Level papers taken by 18 year olds develop such topics in greater depth and in a more critical manner while extending the

scope in different ways, for example, historically in the treatment of origins and the emphasis on modern figures and movements, philosophically in the prominence accorded schools of thought, notably Vedanta, and the assessment of Hindu teaching, even subjecting the definition of Hindu and the concept of Hinduism to scrutiny (AQA, 2016a, 21-24; Edexcel, 2017, 46-50; OCR, 2015, 84-97; WJEC, 2016a, 39-46).

2. Representation and Engagement

The inclusion of Hinduism in the school curriculum and in public examinations raises issues of the accuracy and authenticity of the representation of the tradition. Concerns have been expressed that what is taught is neither recognisable nor relevant, sometimes pitting scholars against Hindus or particular groups of Hindus. These concerns draw attention to the basic question of who is best placed to interpret Hinduism, insiders (Hindus themselves) or outsiders (scholars of Hinduism).

A flashpoint in the United Kingdom was the publication of the textbook *Explaining Hindu Dharma: A Guide for Teachers* produced by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (Prinya, 1996), though there are examples of similar conflicts elsewhere in the Hindu diaspora (Reddy, 2012). Some Hindu activists have campaigned against what they regard as attacks on their faith that concentrate coverage on contentious questions such as polytheism, the caste system and attitudes towards women (Kurien, 2006, 734f.). Nevertheless avoiding these questions can also attract criticism for ignoring a dubious political agenda, therefore providing a positive picture of Hinduism by excluding or denying arguably problematic aspects (Sharma, 2000, 618f.).

Hindu interest in teaching and learning reflects many different views and experiences. For example, the liberal neo-Vedantic Hindu Academy, aligned with the message of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and his master, the ecstatic mystic Shri Ramakrishna (1836-1886), states that its ambition is to encourage an inclusive and rational understanding of Hinduism in respect of religious diversity, and the link between spirituality, humanism and science ('Authority' and 'Home Page' at Hindu Academy website). Vivekananda's neo-Vedantic vision, a modified version of Advaitin monism, upholds the essential unity of religions, the divinity of the self and the compatibility of science with Vedantic tenets (Vivekananda, 1994, 13-15;18f.). The Hindu Academy, inspired by this holistic and integrated conception, seeks to achieve its aims by providing supplementary classes for public examinations, school-based sessions, continuing professional development for teachers of Religious Education, and print and online resources for classroom use (*Our Work* at Hindu Academy website). From a very different perspective, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) founded in New York in 1966 has played a leading part in British Religious Education through its educational arm, ISKCON Educational Services (IES). Sometimes seen as a Hindu-related New Religious Movement, members are divided as to whether ISKCON is separate from, or a strand of, Hinduism but ISKCON increasingly locates itself within the wider context of Hinduism, a position also adopted by IES (Nye, 2001, 27; Warriar, 2012, 463-465). Accordingly, IES provides school visits and classroom speakers, various workshops, resources for both teachers and students, and in-service training courses on Hinduism, including ISKCON's devotional theism as a specific manifestation of this much broader family of traditions (*Home* at ISKCON Educational Services website). In both cases, the representation of Hinduism in and for Religious Education reflects the particular interpretations associated with the groups or organisations involved.

ISKCON's engagement with education extends to the Avanti Schools Trust but the publicly-funded schools are described as Hindu faith schools and a legal distinction is drawn between ISKCON and the Trust while stressing that the Trust is founded upon the same religious teachings as ISKCON ('About' at Avanti Schools Trust website). Thus, the first of these schools (also the first Hindu faith school), a Harrow primary school, sets out its Philosophy, Religion and Ethics curriculum as shaped by Gaudiya

(Bengali) Vaishnavism while providing opportunities for learning about other religions and worldviews ('Curriculum' at Krishna Avanti House Primary School website). Whereas the Avanti School's Trust depends upon public funding, the Swaminarayan School is an independent day school. Its distinctive ethos derives from the Swaminarayan sampradaya, a nineteenth-century Gujarati revivalist movement advocating devotion to Krishna and a strict lifestyle with a stress on the establishment of schools (Jones, 1989, 125-128; The Swaminarayan School website). The Religious Education curriculum in the preparatory school is Hindu in character with a Swaminarayan inflection, so that at Key Stage 1 the movement's gurus are studied and at Key Stage 2 the movement's scripture *Shikshapatri* is included as well as the founder, Swami Narayan, and the recent leader, Pramukh Swami Maharaj (*Curriculum* at The Swaminarayan Prep School website). In the secondary school, Hinduism remains the focus with a similar Swaminarayan stress albeit with an introduction to other religions, the Abrahamic faiths in the first year, and other Dharmic faiths in the second year (*Senior School Curriculum* at The Swaminarayan Senior School website).

3. Pedagogies and Resources

The inclusion of Hinduism has been linked to pedagogies and resources that underwrite and support multi-faith Religious Education (→ [Britischer Religionsunterricht](#)) for all age groups. One of the most influential pedagogies in Religious Education has been phenomenology of religion, probably the most famous proponent of which was Ninian Smart who proposed an originally six-dimensional model for the study of religions (Smart, 1969, 15-25). Appointed Professor of Religious Studies at Lancaster University in 1967, he advanced an argument for Religious Education that advocated pupils' introduction to an open and wide-ranging study of religions (Smart, 1968, 104f.). He was co-founder and president of the Shap Working party on World Religions in Education that was established in order to campaign for multi-faith Religious Education and to provide resources, the best-known of which is a calendar (now e-calendar) of festivals to support this undertaking (Jackson, 1997, 54; *About Us* at Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education website). Indeed, a prominent aspect of the phenomenological approach to Religious Education is the study of festivals in which the Hindu festival of Divali, the festival of lights, is a popular example (Ganeri, 2005, 52-57; Kadodwala/Gateshill, 1995, 8-13). Divali allows teachers to explore the story of Rama and Sita with their pupils who may dress up in Indian clothes to re-enact the couple's return to Rama's capital, prepare Indian sweets to share, create brightly-coloured rangoli patterns to welcome Lakshmi, goddess of fortune, and make small clay diva lamps to cast out darkness. Divali also allows teachers to make connections with other festivals also associated with light, notably Christmas and → Hanukkah, or undertake an investigation of the theme of light across a number of religions.

Some initiatives have focused specifically upon Hinduism, including the World Religions in Education book *Hinduism* that emerged out of the second Shap Conference held in 1970. This book brings together subject knowledge for teachers with essays on the teaching of Hinduism to students of all ages and supporting materials such as annotated bibliographies and a guide to resources (Hinnells/Sharpe, 1972). A later volume, Robert Jackson's and Dermot Killingley's *Approaches to Hinduism*, also combines the academic and educational with supplementary information (Jackson/Killingley, 1988). It employs a nuanced and iterative method, moving between Hinduism as a construct and specific instances of Hindu belief and practice, where biographical case studies are used to qualify the construct by pointing to a complex and contested reality (Jackson, 1997, 126f.). Applying such ideas and insights about the nature of religion to curriculum development, Robert Jackson has championed what he calls an interpretive approach to Religious Education, arising out of ethnographic research with children, including much work with Hindu children, that developed into the Warwick RE Project (Jackson, 1997, 95-98;104f.). This project integrates findings from fieldwork that cast doubt upon conventional categories of religions, recognises the interplay of the tradition as a whole, particular groups and individual adherents, and deploys frameworks drawn from the

religions being studied (Jackson, 1997, 108-110). It leads to a focus on the children featured in curriculum books and a comparative process in which pupils' experiences enter into dialogue with the experiences of the children in these books (Jackson, 1997, 110f.). At Key Stage 3 for younger secondary school pupils, the book on Hindus covers four young Hindus from Leicester with a common Gujarati heritage, Tina, Bhavesh, Tejal and Amit, quotations from whom run throughout the thematic treatment of the tradition (Wayne/Everington/Kadodwala/Nesbitt, 1996). Examples include: Tina's comments on how her family observe Raksha Bandhan (celebration of the relationship between brothers and sisters); Bhavesh's observations on the requirement that prashad (blessed food) is vegetarian; Tejal's description of the role of temples as places of worship and, in Britain, centres for the community; and Amit's account of the generosity of the revered Gujarati saint, Jalaram Babu (Wayne/Everington/Kadodwala/Nesbitt, 1996, 19f.;56).

The Religion in the Service of the Child Project based at Birmingham University was concerned with primary age children and prioritised the children's development, leading to the Gift to the Child approach (Hull, 2000, 114f.). Among the religious items selected for study is the Hindu deity, Ganesha, supported by a picture book of the story of how Ganesha broke his tusk and a photo book of a young Hindu boy conducting morning worship to Ganesha (Grimmitt/Grove/Hull/Spencer, 1991b/1991c). The choice of Ganesha is appropriate, not only because he is associated with education both as the lord of learning and the remover of obstacles but also, as is explained, his appeal to children who find him an attractive and engaging figure (Grimmitt/Grove/Hull/Spencer, 1991a, 39). The opportunities for learning identified centre on images of God with space for pupils to ask questions, make links with their own lives, explore emotional responses to conflict, relate to different characters in the myths and feel awe and wonder, concluding that pupils regard Ganesha with considerable fondness (Grimmitt/Grove/Hull/Spencer, 1991a, 39-43).

Another more recent project, the RE-searchers approach, also focused upon primary school pupils and questions of method, examines religion through different personas representing a range of investigative strategies, broadly ethnographic, philosophical, experiential and textual in nature (Freathy/Freathy/Doney/Walsh/Teece, 2015). Here too Hinduism features in the worked examples in the model of a Key Stage 1 rolling programme, where the characters ask questions about aspects of Hinduism that reflect their contrasting research styles. Hence, in relation to a theme on Hindu sacred literature, *Debate-it-all Derek* enquires about the truth of the narratives, *Ask-it-all Ava* enquires about the meaning of the texts to contemporary British Hindus, *Have-a-go Hugo* enquires about the impact on pupils of studying this literature and *See-the-story Suzie* enquires about connections between episodes in Hindu texts and other stories with which children are familiar (Freathy/Freathy/Doney/Walsh/Teece, 2015, 87).

Such initiatives could be adopted by teachers in other education systems who are interested in teaching Hinduism. As in England, they may have to negotiate Hindu sensitivities about the treatment of Hinduism but may also benefit from the contribution of Hindus to Religious Education in a variety of forms.

4. Conclusion

As the pioneering Indologist, F. Max Muller (1823-1900), famously and repeatedly observed *He who knows one, knows none*. If the gendered language now strikes a discordant note, his basic point stands. Irrespective of other benefits to schools and society as young people see their religions included in the curriculum, and learn to respect the religious, and non-religious, world-views of others, it is only by studying religions, not limiting study to one religion, that it is possible to understand religion. Hinduism in its extraordinary complexity and diversity can play a valuable part in this plural context, offering a wealth of material that can enrich religious education throughout a pupil's school career.

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