

Religion and Belief Literacy: a Framework for Acting in Relation to Religion and Belief

Religion and Belief Literacy: 4 Key Questions for Social Work and Social Care Professionals

Category: What do I/does my organisation count as religion, belief and spirituality? What do we take seriously? Which do we need to accommodate? Which do we exclude, and why?

Disposition: What attitudes, including prejudices, inform the stance we take towards religion, belief and spirituality in our workplace? Do we see it as positive and enriching, or problematic and threatening? Do we think of ourselves as 'secular' and do we know what we mean by that? Neutral? Open? Something else? How could we develop a position on all this if we don't feel we have one now?

Knowledge: What do we need to know here, now, in this setting, with this client/group? Where can I find out? Who can I ask? How should I ask?

Skills: What concrete skills are needed here, now, in this setting with this client/group?

The term 'Religious Literacy' can be traced back to Ward's 1953 article titled *The Right to Religious Literacy* in the American journal *Religious Education*. There it is used to mean that "...the child...has a right...to know God, to know nature, to know the mind and its possibilities, and to know that the knowledge-life as well as the love-life of man has a kind of infinity" (Ward 1953, p380). This is very Christian and committed coinage which was followed by sociologist Vladimir de Lissovoy's 1954 article, *A Sociological Approach to Religious Literacy*. Taking a far more critical stance, in reflections on what ought to be included in an undergraduate introduction to sociology in his university in New York, he observed

"...it is important for the prospective teacher to understand, not only the structure and function of religious institutions found in most communities, but to have knowledge and understanding of the basic religious principles which are inherent in the major denominations" (de Lissovoy 1954, p419).

This reflects a view of religion as a series of traditions, key features of which can be learnt in a sort of A-Z. This has been superseded by a focus on religion and belief, which includes non-religious beliefs too. These are thought of as 'lived' and fluid, not fixed and traditional.

A prolonged period of quiet followed, before Wright's *Religious Education in the Secondary school: Prospects for Religious Literacy* (1993) linked literacy with religion in the context of schools. At this time, literacy was coming to be seen in terms of narrative experiences and sets of social practices, rather than mere knowledge of rules and grammars. In these contexts, Wright framed his arguments for a new religious education in schools, aimed at improving the prospects for better religious literacy. According to him, religious literacy should be about gaining understanding through critical dialogue of how the self and others make meaning, whether through traditional religions or in wider canvases of beliefs.

More recently, Stephen Prothero thinks religious literacy is about the recovery of a loss of knowledge about traditions (Prothero 2008). He thinks this is an important response to a growing 'spiritual marketplace' which is being used politically to enforce a shared conservative brand of morality. He sees this blurring of Protestant beliefs as so embedded in the public square that Americans must know something about Protestant beliefs and the Bible if they are going to be able to participate in and challenge that public square intelligently.

Others like Diane Moore (Moore 2006) want religious literacy to provide us with resources for how to recognise, understand and analyse religious influences in contemporary life as a basis for peace-building. She draws attention to ignorance of the distinction between devotional expression and non-sectarian study of religion; controversy about women and Islam; the multiplicity, as opposed to homogeneity, of traditions and beliefs; change over time; and the cultural specificity of religions which make the same traditions differ from place to place. She emphasises an ability to perceive the connections between a complexly religious world and the social, political and cultural.

Another approach takes this further, seeing religious literacy as 'harmony'. Michael Barnes and Jonathan Smith insist on a broadly multi-faith perspective (Barnes and Smith, 2016). They say that it is the very specificity of faith commitments that gives them life and that the task is not to elide them but to value their differences. This is about a deep engagement with religion as people live it.

Ford and Higton develop this, exploring the role of Theology and Religious Studies (Ford and Higton, 2016). For them, Theology and Religious Studies are not the same as religious literacy, but they may be used as tools to achieve it. For them, talk within and about a public realm is simply not possible without taking seriously the pervasive religion within it, regardless of one's own religion, beliefs, or none. They perceive useful 'argumentative structures' in all the religious traditions which can be used to enable dialogue. Engagement in what they call this 'conversational mode' will lead to religious literacy, they argue.

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Across the field there is a shared sense that religion and belief literacy is important because too many have lost the ability to talk about religion and belief in the public sphere, putting everybody, religious and non-religious, at a disadvantage because religion and belief are so central an aspect of many human lives. As has been argued elsewhere, “there is an urgent need to re-skill public professionals and citizens for the daily encounter with the full range of religious plurality” (Dinham, 2016 p. 110) across the widest of settings and sectors. One response is the religion and belief literacy framework which has emerged from a decade or so of work in this field (Dinham 2019).

The framework consists of a journey through four phases. The first phase is called ‘categorisation’ and is concerned with the need to understand the conceptual landscape in which religion and belief are framed and what people think is meant by these terms. In particular, it is concerned with how individuals and communities themselves categorise or define religion and belief. In the 21st century, arguably this incorporates potential for stretchy definitions of religion and beliefs to include consumerised, deformed, revival and non-religious beliefs, values and worldviews. The critical thing is that each person or organisation knows what they mean and can articulate this clearly. It is intended to encourage understandings of religion and belief as lived experiences which manifestly affect the way that people live their lives (Schilbrack 2010) rather than as historic perspectives or cultural artefacts (Boisvert, 2015).

The second phase of this framework is ‘disposition’. This involves exploration of the often unconscious emotional and atavistic assumptions that people bring to discussions about religion and belief (Kanitz, 2005) and making these explicit. There may be significant gaps between what people feel, what they think, and what they know in relation to religion and belief, and these can readily be conflated. Being able to identify these assumptions and emotions is seen as a critical precursor for thoughtful engagement with diverse religions and beliefs. It often translates into an institutional ‘stance’ (Dinham and Jones, 2012) which adds a further layer to the context in which professionals and workplaces respond to religion and belief diversity when they encounter it.

‘Knowledge’ is the third phase of the religion and belief literacy framework. While some general knowledge of the religions and beliefs which are likely to be encountered may be impor-

tant, equally significant is having the capacity and openness to acquire further knowledge from credible sources when required. This entails developing the confidence and experience to ask appropriate questions appropriately. It recognises that the lived experiences of any religion or belief are fluid and permeable and can vary considerably, so that religiously literate people are those who are able to understand religion and belief as changing, heterogeneous – as identity rather than tradition.

The final phase in the framework is ‘skills’. Having developed clarity about how religion and belief are understood in the social and conceptual landscape, being aware of one’s assumptions and having some knowledge of some religion practices and beliefs all informs the skills required. There is a dearth of research underpinning the sorts of skills which are needed, given that the skills required should be related to the challenges and needs at hand in any given sector or setting. The religion and belief literacy framework concludes that this requires new research to plug the gaps – whether that be large-scale and formal or swift and informal. The scope and scale will depend on the needs, timescales and resources available. Important work has already been undertaken around death and dying, in hospices for example (Pentaris, 2019), and on working with indigenous communities in Canada (Coates et al., 2007) and Australia (Bessarab and Ng’andu, 2010), though the extent to which this has entered their respective target fields of social work education and practice is debatable. The opportunities for identifying the religion and belief challenges in every setting are extensive, as are the possibilities for translating findings into skills through training and practice.

Overall, the framework is intended for thinking through the implications and challenges of religions, beliefs and worldviews in different situations and real-life contexts, starting with the understanding that religion and belief literacy resides in an improved quality of conversation about the category of religion and religious belief itself, which first of all irons out all of the muddled binaries and assumptions. Such a framework then requires an exploration of disposition – the atavistic and emotional feelings we each carry about religion and belief – and only then to a discovery of the knowledge and skills which are needed. This sees religion and belief literacy as contingent and setting-specific. It is a stretchy, fluid concept that is variously configured and applied, and should be adapted as appropriate to the specific environment.