'RE/TRS' is a Girl's Subject: Talking about Gender and the Discourse of 'Religion' in UK Educational Spaces

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Abstract

This article addresses what appears to be a retrenchment into narrower forms of identification and an increased suspicion of difference in the context of educational policy in the UK – especially in relation to 'Religious Education'. The adoption of standardized management protocols – 'managerialism' – across most if not all policy contexts including public educational spaces reduces spaces for encountering or addressing genuine difference and for discovering something new and different. A theory of the 'feminization of religion' associated historically with Barbara Welter, provides some useful insights as to why this might be, suggesting that those in British society who would prefer to see greater separation from 'religion' in 'secular' schools may well also be caught up in forms of gender stereotyping.

Keywords

Difference, educational policy, gender stereotyping, managerialism, religion, religious education

Background: Hostility towards Difference Generally…

In 2012 the journal *Policy Futures In Education* put out a call for papers on the subject of 'Islam and the end of European multiculturalism' (Policy Futures In Education, 2012). The call suggested that an important issue for public consideration was that, whereas from the 1960s cultural diversity had been something intrinsically to be celebrated as well as economically exploited, European politicians have recently been thinking about cultural difference in much more negative terms:

> In 2010 Angela Merkel declared that multiculturalism in Germany had 'failed utterly' and indicated that it was an illusion to think that Germans and 'gastarbeiters' or 'guest workers' could live happily together. Merkel's stance was repeated by Nicolas Sarkozy in 2011 who commented that 'We have been too concerned about the identity of the person who was arriving and not enough about the identity of the country that was receiving him [sic]' (Policy Futures In Education, 2012).

> Certainly, the media have tended to resort ever more readily, post 9/11, to stereotypes that stoke up hostility against Islam and Muslims in particular (Cesari, 2010), as if they were the paradigm of dangerous difference. Moreover, since the economic crisis of 2008, people characterized as different – that is 'foreign'– have once again become a focus of fears about the economic recovery

(Brown, 2013; Doyle, 2013) of various imagined communities (Anderson, 2006 only 1983 in refs - check) giving greater confidence to far right and nationalist ideologies (Grumke, 2013; Resenberger and Hadj-Abdou, 2012).

At the same time, this unfriendliness towards broadly social and cultural difference is accompanied by the widespread employment of a managerial language and praxis. This has the effect of shapingoals and creating expectations in ways that are more resistant to thinking differently, effectively privileging what is standard over what is unusual whether in procedural or cultural terms (Verran, 1999). So research projects in education – the topic of this article – will be routinely required to conform to patterns of specific measurability that are determined by the kind of 'smart' protocols derived from the context of businesses where the primary aim is to measure financial loss and gain. This has clear benefits for enterprises 'for profit', but its totalizing effects in other contexts like education can be oppressive and highly limiting to the imagination and indeed to the human spirit (Roberts, 2012). Similarly, in policy terms, desirable scientific rigor in research seems often to be confused with programmes of standardized testing, assessing pre-determined outcomes, and otherwise enacting programmes of alignment along very well-beaten tracks. Examples of this would be international comparative studies such as the *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study* (TIMSS), the *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS) and OECD's *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) (Biesta, 2009: 1). Any concern with less definable longterm goals or an open curiosity about that which challenges us through its difference, thus struggles to assert itself against what Patti Lather has called:

> a world wide audit culture with its governmental demands for evidence based practice
> and the consequent (re)privileging of scientistic methods (Lather, 2007: 2).

Against these kinds of moves Lather, a social scientist working in education, strives to 'take the side of the messy' (Lather, 2010: 9). By invoking in a resistant way, the value of 'getting lost', she argues that meaningful research should not simply serve the agenda of those who in policy terms, already exercise power and seek in this way to maintain it by strategic alignments and exclusions.

Alternatively, building on Lather's approach we might start the work of what in a UK context is presently called 'religious education' (RE), a term I use to encompass cognate 'subjects' across all three levels of public education. In relation to Lather's account then, by making the (different) assumption that since all educational spaces will always encompass more than normative policy frameworks could possibly identify as significant, the job of educators in these particular spaces might be conceived more imaginatively. It could be understood in terms, for example, of leading (young) people to see more of this complexity rather than less. We might thus frame our work as educators in terms of purposeful engagement with what is not normative, acknowledging from the beginning our interest in precisely what is excessive and disturbing, accepting the potential for some

loss and confusion, yet also for positive transformations in ethical and imaginative ways that the unrelenting pursuit of greater effectiveness without openness to difference, could not.

What then would be our 'subject matter'? How can we identify or see what escapes the existing framework of schooling 'to order' – by which would be meant a focus merely on the effectiveness with which we channel (young) people in alignment with pre-established patterns of learning? In this article I shall suggest that at least two such ethically and imaginatively charged 'subjects' – woman/the feminine and the discourse of 'religion' itself – can indeed be discerned. The nature of these two subjects as 'excessive' to the norm is indicated at least in part by the efforts employed in trying to minimize or disguise the uneasiness they provoke. Part of the point of this article is also to suggest that these two areas or subjects are connected to each other in an interesting way. Thus, in a school where I was teaching RE back in the 1980s, this kind of minimizing effect was achieved through a cultural assumption or myth that 'religion' was a girls' subject; the gendering of the subject as feminine was intended presumably, both to reinforce a more general sexism and at the same time dispel ambivalence about the subject itself by this gendered relegation to the margins of school life.

The Theory of Feminization: Revealing (Gendered) Excesses that Give Scope for Encountering Genuine Difference

Let us begin then by looking at women and the feminine as sites or spaces that generate discomfort. In terms of the prevailing logic of dualism (Grumet and Stone, 2000) within the western world, the nature of the difference represented by woman as problematic 'other' to the normative male, has been widely acknowledged since Simone de Beauvoir wrote her classic work of feminist philosophy, *The Second Sex* in 1949. But although this is no longer news in academic contexts, the assumption of masculine entitlement she identified seems to be taking a much longer time to disappear within society at large so that for example the World Health Organisation report, *Global and Regional Estimates of Violence Against Women* (World Health Organisation, 2013) revealed that 35% of all women experience intimate partner violence. Thus, a gendered hierarchy, accepted and effective across multiple European spaces and spheres still seems to be one of the fixed rules of the game; a Bourdieuian *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977). And yet, in spite of the evidence that we have still not achieved the ideal of equality between the genders yet alone any kind of genuinely ethical acknowledgement of gender difference, we often hear people talk as if there was no longer a problem. Arguably this is precisely because our culture is still investing in normative gender values, and in this way we are being encouraged to downplay the need for further change.

Of course, within publicly administered educational spaces in the UK there is some detectable movement. For example statistics produced by Higher Education Statistics Agency

(HESA) show that more than 50% of the total population of students at every level of higher education in the UK (2013/2014) were female (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2013/2014a) However, though this is a positive indicator, we should not accept the narrative of new freedoms and opportunities for women based on these statistics too much at face value. Figures vary according to the subjects studied and the levels reached (See also HESA statistics broken down in terms of science/humanities and at undergraduate, masters and PhD levels (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2013/2014b). Moreover, it remains crucial to question the very meaning of freedom and opportunity in a world that is still in many places and contexts, substantively or structurally masculinist or patriarchal. S(m)oothing narratives of the optimistic kind suggest definitive change has taken place, yet it is arguable that some of the characteristics of an older form of education focused on the needs and expectations of men rather than women are still being encoded into formal schooling within a European context; the difference is that now more girls and women are directly subject to these effects. So if formal and public schooling in western Europe *in the past*, bracketed out material relations associated with the feminine and maternal, for example, in order primarily to initiate boys and young men into the masculine world (Grumet and Stone, 2000: 187), we may still need critically to review contemporary educational policy in relation to this kind of gendered agenda in order to see how it now affects women.

In other words, an increase in numbers of women at university in the UK does not in itself or necessarily change the nature of UK society in ways favourable to women. The increased number of female students arguably does not guarantee, that the bifurcation born out of the European Enlightenment – between the idea of nature broadly gendered as female and reason gendered as male, for example – is finally being deconstructed or addressed in these educational spaces. There are of course publications that do address these complex issues (Tylor and Knott, 2007) but similarly this does not guarantee wide readership or quick dispersal of the effects of such broad generalizations. It does not ensure that the visceral fear and hatred of women, clearly still motivating violent hostility towards them has gone away. Having a university degree doesn't necessarily protect women from forms of gendered violence or domestic abuse (Pain, 2012: 8), or from the systematic limitations of UK society in making proper provision for child care. Although in this latter case, the added earning power of graduate women may soften the impact of having to care for young children, women are still subject to social norms affecting career choice and development based on wider stereotypes and generalizations about what, for example, is a properly maternal attitude. Tackling these underlying attitudes and assumptions is perhaps made easier when there is a critical mass of highly qualified women in positions of greater public responsibility, but it would be rash to assume that it simply follows on from the opening up to them of university education. In the UK, projects such as Athena SWAN (Equality Challenge Unit, =2013??) and Aurora (Leadership Foundation for

Higher Education, 2013), are now being targeted at the problematic 'glass ceilings' that clearly still exist in the system of British higher education but these schemes in themselves illustrate the fact that reassuring narratives about improvement cannot be taken at face value; women and the feminine constitute a kind of difference that still has the power to unsettle and to provoke a hostile response within patriarchal institutions still dominated by men. Arguably, it also has the power, when attended to with ethical discernment and imagination, to open up a wide expanse for more positive transformation.

Moving on to the second focus, another site within educational spaces in the UK where there is evidence of unease is the gradual distillation of the term 'religion'. This too might become a starting place for explorations leading to discoveries that unsettle the *status quo*, feed the imagination and allow for a more strongly ethical dimension. Since the days of the European Enlightenment, it has been suggested, the term 'religion' has been used in a coded form to reflect irrational savagery and violence (Cavanaugh, 2009: 3). It has been set up in binary relationship with 'the secular' (Fitzgerald, 2007) and its contrasting associations with ordered, disembodied rationality and the privilege of an empirically based, scientific practice of knowledge and understanding, has stressed the centrality of man [sic]:

> the attempt to create a transhistorical and transcultural concept of religion that is essentially prone to violence is one of the foundational legitimating myths of the liberal nation state. The myth of religious violence helps to construct and marginalize a religious Other, prone to fanaticism, to contrast with the rational, peace-making, secular subject (Cavanaugh, 2009: 4).

Significantly of course 'religion' used ideologically in this way, has a pejorative inflection evoking traits commonly associated with woman and the feminine that have been analysed exhaustively in feminist literature over at least the last 60 years. Thus it is no surprise to discover the idea of a connection has been mooted before and I am extremely grateful to Dr Kathleen McPhillips from the School of Humanities at the University of New? South Wales, Australia for bringing this to my attention. In the 1970s, for example, perceiving the coming together of woman and the feminine and the discourse of 'religion', the American feminist historian Barbara Welter proposed a theory of the feminization of religion:

> In the period following the American Revolution, political and economic activities were critically important and therefore more "masculine" that is, more competitive, more aggressive, more responsive to shows of force and strength. Religion, along with the family and popular taste, was not very important, and so became the property of the ladies. Thus it entered a process of change whereby it became more

domesticated, more emotional, more soft and accommodating – in a word, more "feminine" (Welter, 1974: 138).

In the intervening years, the feminizing move Welter envisages here – which in her view seeks to stifle in (female) bourgeois respectability and impotence, certain elements, actions or assumptions perceived as excessive or inconvenient to post revolutionary America – has arguably been similarly apparent in the culture of a contemporary UK. Drawing on the work of Timothy Fitzgerald, for example, we might say that the religion/secular binary, gendered and hierarchical, continues to be marshalled as a means of marginalizing and excluding older ontologies and sources of powers like the Christian Church and its theologies. An essentialized 'religion' is increasingly associated with the inner person and with the private motivations of (typically) his business, sexual and domestic affairs, and subordinated to principles – the sovereignty of the individual or of empirical science or the ideology of capitalism and the free market – deemed 'secular'. And, of course, the act of discriminating between discourses of 'religion' and 'secularity' lends itself very easily to hierarchical thinking in gendered terms, such that the impression is given – in response to the Church's loss of status let us say – that it has undergone a form of emasculation with all the cultural weight of that idea.

An idea of the feminization of religion can thus also be usefully employed to theorize the uneasiness that continues to exist around educational spaces in the UK dedicated to 'religion' (RE) that I would nevertheless want to identify as a starting point for more imaginative and ethical practice and thinking in educational spaces. Historically RE in British school spaces has been a matter of statutory provision, reflecting the persistence of a view that Christianity in particular is part of our national heritage and core British identity. Very few politicians have been bold enough to contest the powerful idea in the minds of many British people that these RE spaces are contexts for inculcating moral standards (Beasley, 2005). And opposing or challenging this connection between Christianity and moral standards too openly remains impolitic. Yet 'religion' in UK educational spaces undoubtedly also sticks in the throats of a different but substantial proportion of UK citizens. These are people who, in so far as they think 'religion' is tolerable at all, regard it as a strictly private matter, something that might underpin moral perspectives but which remains legitimate only within the private (and feminized) spaces of home and family. In other words, there is widespread ambivalence and uneasiness about what should be done in these messy RE spaces and anecdotally, many schools are quietly non- or barely compliant with the statutory requirements. Regular 'acts of worship' (also required by statute) are sometimes reduced to the barest minimum, and RE as a compulsory, non-examination subject may be linked up with other subjects in arrangements that reduce it to an occasional course taught by someone with little or no specialist knowledge or interest.

Of course, at the same time, there is a body of trained specialist RE teachers in secondary schools in the UK and even some specialist curators in galleries and museums, who defend the educational spaces dedicated – however problematically – to a discourse of 'religion' with great enthusiasm. Such educators – a group of whom the author and John I'Anson of the University of Stirling's School of Education, interviewed during 2012/13 as part of a project called, 'Engaging Stakeholders' – tend to defend their work precisely in terms of the space it provides for exploring and engaging with forms of difference and multiculturalism, and in defiance of the suggestion with which this article began. Committed curators, teachers and lecturers take visitors/students into Mosques, Churches, Buddhist retreat centres, or put together exhibitions of artefacts, photographs and recordings. They bring in priests and rabbis and witches and draw on the expertise of parents and friends and members of different ethnic communities in preparing and sharing foods, or singing, reciting and praying, dancing, dressing up, performing, meditating and contemplating. They try to challenge the unproductive limitations of stereotypes and to improve the capacity of (young) people, creatively to deal with difference as an inevitable challenge to normative values and expectations.

This fairly well established approach is, of course, particularly associated in RE and TRS contexts with the work of Ninian Smart in the late 1960s (Smart, 1968, 1969 not in refs -check) when there was something of a RE revolution in the UK. Smart's approach reflected a characteristically phenomenological turn that sought to bracket out the assumptions of western, Christian confessionalism in order to approach different experiences, eschewing judgement and with something closer to empathy. Ironically, the knowledge practices initiated by Smart – for example, the development of a number of so-called 'religious dimensions' (Smart, 1983 (1969): 15–25) – though originally designed as a means of exploring and understanding different perspectives – have, over time, themselves become increasingly aligned with practices of measurability rather than pathways towards the ethical and imaginative acknowledgement of genuine difference. Of course, even if we put these gradual accretions relating to assessment aside and return to Smart's formative concern with difference, these approaches, however passionately defended by subsequent educators, generally stop short of abandoning the ultimate privileges of objectivity; a powerful western notion, associated with human (male) rationality and the methodologies of empirical science. Challenging this privilege in relation to wholly different ontologies, would indeed be to enter extremely risky territory in western educational spaces. However, given that very few educators seem actually to be engaged in this kind of exploration to even a limited degree, it is perhaps all the more significant that even the potential for framing this sort of question or challenge is being increasingly sidelined. In other words, it is being smoothed away by the feminizing narrative Welter identified in terms of being 'not very important', illustrated in the stark evidence of disinvestment by recent governments across British RE (Keast, 2013) and TRS spaces over the last decade.

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It is not hard then to see how the myth that '"religious education" is a girl's subject' might still have purchase in many people's minds, given that coding something as feminine still widely implies its lack of importance or its subordination to other privileged subjects and discourses. For example, a student studying Religion and Professional Education in my own institution recently interviewed staff and pupils to gauge attitudes towards RE at the school in which she was undertaking her teaching practice. Although she reported that most responses to her question, 'Is RME seen as being uncool?' were non-committal, the following more negative response perfectly exemplifies the feminzation theory:

> I think it's different for boys than girls; if a guy said he preferred RME than PE or
> techy (technical education) then he would probably get laughed at, but I don't think it
> really matters for girls (male pupil, aged 14/15)
> (Calderwood, 2013: 46).

This evidence for gender coding, is too insubstantial in itself to be regarded as more than anecdotal of course. Nevertheless it certainly conforms with the idea that normative masculine structures and values continue to have resilience and are still at work in educational spaces, ensuring that subjects or discourses that are different, excessive, troubling or otherwise messy in the gendered sense explored above, are contained and their significance, or imaginative and ethical possibilities downplayed.

The underlying presumption of this article, however, is that educational spaces in general and 'religious education' spaces in particular within the UK should function in such a way as to allow the development of a genuine openness towards difference; an enriching if potentially risky engagement with that which exceeds privileged limits and expectations, even to the point of examining the privileges of western ontologies and their prized notions of objectivity. Of course, it is fair to say that there is certainly some acknowledgement of the importance of discussing difference; for example in the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence (Education Scotland, 2010) where engagement with diversity under the heading of citizenship is clearly stated as a value. However, there are also many counter-indications – including the disinvestment in RE as an area of the curriculum mentioned already.

In conclusion, there seems to be a general falling out of love with multiculturalism – a kind of retrenchment into narrower forms of identification and an increased suspicion of difference in every context, alongside a continued uneasiness with discourses of the feminine and of 'religion'. In alignment with this it would seem, the adoption of standardized management protocols – 'managerialism' – across most if not all policy contexts including the administration of public educational spaces reduces still further the spaces for encountering or addressing genuine difference, for actually getting messy or lost or discovering something new and different. A theory of the 'feminization of religion' associated historically with Barbara Welter, provides some useful insights

as to why this might be, suggesting that those in British society who would prefer to see greater separation from 'religion' in 'secular' schools may well also be caught up in forms of gender stereotyping that render the discourse of 'religion' in this way as 'not very important'. And equally, this is something that might also help to explain the present vulnerable position of RE/TRS in public educational spaces across the UK. It suggests, in other words, that RE and TRS are being generally dismissed within a national context that remains culturally sexist. Arguably, far from being the result of the insignificance of these discourses however, these effects may be the result of efforts to resist or avoid their profoundly challenging natures.

A Response? The Pedagogics of Generosity as a Model?

By way of an appendix to this analysis and in support of practices that engage creatively with all kinds of messy, risky and disturbing difference, I propose very briefly here to illustrate one sort of approach that could be taken to show how and why these feminized educational spaces might provide more imaginative ways of achieving the kind of educational values that are still being cited in policy documents and institutional mission statements – however much these might appear to be out of touch with what is actually happening on the ground. This example is taken from the work of queer studies scholar, Nelson Rodriguez, who describes a pedagogy for encountering and exploring difference not in order to assess or measure it against normative standards, or to diminish the significance of the challenge it proposes to those standards, but to bring about positive change and transformation in those who are challenged (Rodriguez, 2012) As a queer studies scholar, Rodriguez focuses not on woman and the feminine or on the discourse of 'religion' but on the topic of transgender. But this 'pedagogics of generosity' works well as a broader 'pedagogics of difference' exemplifying some of the sorts of ethically creative possibilities that could be opened up in RE/TRS educational spaces when there is genuine willingness to engage deeply with difference rather than downplay its significance or subordinate it absolutely to a privileged notion of objectivity.

Rodriguez's pedagogy requires all participants in an encounter with real and challenging difference – in this case gender transformation or transgender – to avoid the momentum of alignment by involving themselves, through the screening of two films, in narratives of transformation that could be posed in contrast to the narratives referred to above that smooth over real and present differences. What is key is that his choices of film reflect a desire not simply to resolve the issue of gender identity but to welcome an unresolved difference or one resolved differently as a basis for creativity and transformation. In *Ma Vie en Rose* (Berliner, 1997) for example, the seven year old protagonist Ludovic, whose unresolved gender identity is initially met with almost universal hostility, remains unaligned in this respect to the end of the film. Yet there is positive transformation. Ludovic achieves some greater acceptance and all of the characters make significant changes, according to the kind of pedagogics of generosity Rodriguez suggests, in order to find a way to

continue living and relating to Ludovic and to each other in response. In the second film, *Gender Rebel* (Epstein, 2006), Kim's options for becoming more masculine – specifically undergoing a mastectomy – are not finalized; we do not get to see 'the end of the story' but focus instead on the kind of generosity and openness that allows parents and children, siblings, sexual partners and friends to live creatively with messy transformations and/or differences in loving relationships and significantly without standardized assessments of success or failure.

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