RE: Pedagogy – after neutrality?

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Abstract

Within the UK and in many parts of the world, official accounts of what it is to make sense of religion are framed within a rhetorics of neutrality in which such study is premised upon the possibility of dispassionate engagement and analysis. This paper, which is largely theoretical in scope, explores both the affordances and the costs of such an approach which has become 'black boxed' on account of the work that it achieves.

A series of new orientations within the academy that are broadly associated with post-structuralist philosophies, feminist and post-colonial studies, together with insights from Science and Technology Studies, question the plausibility of these claims for neutrality whilst in turn raising a series of new questions and priorities. It therefore becomes necessary to re-think and re-frame what it is to make sense of religious and cultural difference after neutrality.

The gathering and co-ordination of new planes of sense-making that are responsive to an emergent series of epistemological, ontological, and ethical orientations are considered. Some of the distinctive pedagogical implications of such an approach that engages material practice, difference and uncertainty are then entertained.

Orientations

Within the United Kingdom becoming educated about religions has a statutory place within the school curriculum. Official guidelines and qualifications, while differing in emphasis, now incorporate a commitment to some form of 'world religions' approach in recognition that schools have a role in preparing young people for an increasingly pluralistic and multicultural context (e.g., QCA 2004; LTS 2009). This marks a significant change for until the 1970s religious education was largely confessional in nature, reflecting previously dominant forms of religious practice. However, it became increasingly apparent that the assumption of a particular theological standpoint – Christianity - and limited pedagogies focused largely upon printed texts, had become problematic in the light of far reaching cultural change (Cunningham 2001). Within higher education sectors too, there were calls for new approaches to the study of religion that took a more global and comparative approach located outside traditional theology departments.

A new approach that acknowledged religious and cultural diversity through a focus upon 'world views' produced objects of knowledge that could be analysed via a particular toolkit of concepts that rendered such practice properly educational. One of the principal architects of the world religions approach was the late Ninian Smart who worked at the universities of Lancaster and Santa Barbara, California. Smart's central problematic in the 1960s and 70s was that of creating a space for hospitality to religious and cultural difference at a time when the obtaining *episteme* [1] was not congenial to such concerns. He drew upon available theoretical resources to provide a warrant for new sense-making practices at both school and university levels (I'Anson and Jasper 2006). The new approach drew upon aspects of phenomenology in which individual presuppositions and prejudices were to be bracketed in order to focus on the object of concern (Smart 1973). A multidimensional approach was developed which embraced six dimensions (later extending to eight) that might enable analysis and exploration of different 'world views', including phenomena such as Marxism that bore 'religion–like' characteristics (Smart 1971). Through such means a new framing was articulated that inaugurated a broader and more inclusive cultural stance.

The new approach positioned itself as 'value free' (Smart 1973, 21) within a secular environment which was regarded as 'characteristically open and not tied to any given ideology' (Smart 1973, 42). It was therefore presented as occupying a neutral position in between confessional / theological approaches on the one hand, and 'extra-religious' approaches, such as psychology or sociology, on the other. The latter were characterized as reductionistic on account of their

explanation of religious phenomena in other-than-religious terms. Methodological neutrality aimed to provide a space in which different logics of sense might be entertained on the assumption that these are meaningful within their own terms. Some such framing of neutrality continues to inform official accounts of the curriculum in the present United Kingdom context and remains influential in many higher education contexts. This approach has also been adopted in many parts of the world including Australia, North America and New Zealand.

The Appeal of Neutrality

Neutrality is a polyvalent term that has multiple consequences for sense-making practices in relation to religious and cultural difference. An appeal to neutrality, for a given practice or manner of approach, is to claim for that method a fairness, lack of bias and disinterestedness, whilst simultaneously positioning other accounts as in some way lacking such impartiality. The claim of neutrality is therefore to a higher moral ground that relinquishes political interests and thus represents things as they are, on their own terms. There is an implicit claim to a purer truth, therefore, than is possible with theological or extra-religious accounts which involve translation within their own characteristic framings. The act of gathering in diverse traditions for a sympathetic hearing within educational spaces is therefore to be positively welcomed; no harm can befall either the religion concerned or the student engaging with it. Neutrality is therefore a persuasive trope which also works to allay fears about the possible

effects of attending to religious traditions that are themselves compelling and even potentially dangerous (Bowker 1987). In so far as neutrality installs a detached and dispassionate engagement with religious traditions, it also acts as guarantor of their non-affectingness within educational spaces. As neutral, these very sense-making practices *neutralize* the potential claims and subjectivising effects that might otherwise follow from encounter with religious traditions.

Such has been the appeal of neutrality in establishing grounds for sense making in relation to religious and cultural difference that the approach became enshrined in national policy and this reinforced institutional and personal alignments. A world religions approach was taken up in schools, teacher training institutions and university departments (Barnes 2000), and, in Actor Network terms, became *the* 'obligatory passage point' (Callon 1986) for all those who wished to teach or study religion in educational spaces within the UK. The rhetorics of neutrality which legitimated the new approach as superior to competing methods, also gave warrant for this way of doing things to be taken as normative. The very success of the new approach in opening a new field of enquiry has led to the various enactments, framings and orientations that together constitute neutrality becoming 'naturalized', losing in this process both a sense of their historical and social contingency (Bowker and Star 1999). As such, the theoretical methodology informing the rhetorics of neutrality has become 'black boxed' [2] (Latour 1987, 1999) enabling the set of practices, tools and assumptions to be taken as a reliable and necessary way in which religious and cultural difference might be approached and understood in educational contexts.

But is this achieved hegemony as regards framing and practice still sound in the light of far reaching theoretical change during the past thirty or so years? Certainly in other fields of enquiry claims to neutrality have become subject to sustained critique whether in law (Spencer and Brogan 2006) science studies (Harding 1998), education (Weiss 2006), or philosophy (Scolnicov 1988), in so far as these claim 'neutrality as a value while espousing a substantive position' (Church 1998, 238). So whilst we may wish to acknowledge the significant accomplishments associated with neutrality in terms of constituting a distinct field of enquiry and in its enfranchisement of the right to representation of other than western cultures within educational spaces – we might, nevertheless, still wish to enquire into the terms of this incorporation and the costs associated with it. Do warrants for neutrality, once surfaced, remain plausible in relation to a gendered and postcolonial milieu? And, if not, what are the consequences for pedagogies of religious and cultural difference? In order to open this back box it is necessary to read the rhetorics of neutrality 'against the grain'; to unpick a series of practices and assumptions that have together constituted this as a particular kind of assemblage.

Neutrality's plane of sense-making: an orientation to diversity?

Bhabha (1994, 1990) identifies two distinct orientations to making sense that he characterizes as those of diversity and difference. Approaches that are characterized as promoting diversity tend to make sense of the other within the

interpreter's own framings and do not seriously problematise these. Implicit in an orientation to diversity is a work of translation, which may not be noticed by those engaged in its practice. Bhabha contrasts this with approaches that attempt to acknowledge difference on its own terms. To do so involves acknowledging that there may be a *gap* in making sense of the phenomenon in question. Sense *may* emerge, but it may not be a straightforward process and may well be the outcome of some kind of struggle in which the ideas and practices encountered exceed conventional assumptions and ways of going on. Whilst, in practice, it is unlikely that any given approach tends exclusively to one of these polarities, Bhabha's distinction may nevertheless prove useful as an initial heuristic for critically examining the range of practices and assumptions that together constitute neutrality as an orientation to sense-making. A contrast might then be drawn with different orientations that mobilize other enactments.

The official account assumes that it is possible to construct a plane of sense-making in relation to religious and cultural difference that is neutral in its effects. This is conceived as a textual surface subject to rules of grammar and syntax that represents or mirrors a pre-existing and independent reality that is 'out there' (Rorty 1979). These representations permit analysis and comparison within the terms of a specific western episteme. The rhetorics of neutrality assumes that this plane of sense-making does not have a material influence on how knowledge of religious and cultural difference is made.

The extent to which reality does in fact accord with linguistic constructs has been questioned at least since the time of Nietzsche (Barad 2003). Recent work

has explored how planes of sense are conceptually ordered in terms of a series of separations and elisions that are usually naturalized and taken as real. These are produced through the deployment of a series of binaries that tend to privilege one side and overlook the other. In relation to religion, for example, the secular, public, and political dimensions represent the other side of such a binary and these tend to down played when religion is analyzed. To this extent religion might be regarded as 'half a category' with the secular / political always haunting this, even though this presence remains typically unacknowledged in conventional analyses (Fitzgerald 2003, 210). One of the effects of phenomenology's wager upon the meaning dimension alone (Žižek 2005) is to elide issues of power in decisions about how a discursive field is to be determined (Asad 1993; Said 1985). The focus on bracketing in relation to truth claims and identifications can be seen to reinforce the exclusion of the political from the understanding of religions and to allow the ensuing account to sit all too comfortably within the State's definitions of religion and subjectivity, as other than the public and political spheres, without serious problematisation (Fitzgerald 2003, 2007).

Work within feminist and post-colonial studies, has argued that such planes of sense-making are far from neutral and have potentially far-reaching political effects. The possibility of an innocent portrayal of a culture has been subject to sustained critique both theoretically (e.g. Wyschogrod 1998; Baumann 1989) and as regards the political deployment of knowledge within situations of colonial encounter, such as South Africa, where representations of others were pressed in the service of political interests (Chidester 1996a, b; 2003). Neutrality

is further questioned if it is asked *whose* account of religion is being privileged, and what are the *effects* produced by these translations? (Chakrabarty 2000). When analysis is carried out through the mobilization of a series of *apriori* categories, this elision of the political is all but effected. The various dimensions (ritual, myth, experience and so forth) that are deployed to make sense of a culture are found to be characteristically western. Since *these* are the privileged terms for creating a plane for sense-making within educational contexts, the particular idioms, expressions and concepts through which a people know themselves and make sense of their surroundings, are obscured from view (Long 1986). Far from being neutral, therefore, contemporary critiques point to ways in which such approaches reinscribe western cultural assumptions that inform what Derrida (1982, 213) called the 'white mythology'. To the extent that these categories are simply assumed, this involves an imposition of a 'predetermined plane with fixed coordinates' (Rajchman 2000, 5) which is far from neutral in its effects.

Terms of engagement: world views and beliefs

The prevalence of categories such as 'world view' smuggle in characteristically western epistemological assumptions. Ingold and Kurttila's (2000) work amongst the Saami people in northernmost Finland, for example, has highlighted how such concern with 'worldviews' and 'ways of seeing' can be a hindrance to understanding cultures that foreground embodied forms of knowing, such as touch. [3] The bias towards the visual that is characteristic of western appeals to

transhistorical forms of rationality cannot, therefore, be regarded as 'neutral' in regard to making sense of cultural traditions that prioritise different sensory modalities and forms of reasoning.

Within such forms of categorization the concept of belief typically plays a significant part in identifying an object of enquiry over which detached analysis is exercised. Although often assumed to be a universal category, the concept of belief is a distinctively western term that has developed within Christianity (Lopez 1998) and, as Schopen (1998, 264) has observed, the admittance of material, archeological and epigraphic sources into the study of Christianity, which might issue in a less abstract forms of sense-making, was 'slow and grudging'. This provides further warrant for Foucault's (1988, 17) statement that, 'Christianity has always been more interested in the history of its beliefs than in the history of real practices'. According to Keller (2002, 7) this:

> strong association, that religiousness is a matter of belief that transpires in the psychic space of an individual, is extremely limiting if one is trying to make sense of religiousness in the contemporary world.

The focus upon beliefs tends to orientate analysis to disembodied cognitive performances as the way to 'see' and understand the other, over a concern with material practices (Yates 2000). These become the privileged mode of access to another culture over a concern with material, affective, and political dimensions in and through which any responsibility might be exercised. Feminist critiques such as Jantzen (1998) and Irigaray (2004) link this focus upon beliefs and truth

conditions with a masculinist symbolic that performatively denies material

implication. *Apriori* categories, beliefs, coupled with overarching categories such

as 'world views' all tend towards a two-dimensional plane of sense-making that

empties events of their material, political, and affective specificity.

An orientation to difference: ontological politics

The above analysis has sought to highlight some of the assumptions and

practices that together constitute the plane of sense-making associated with a

rhetorics of neutrality. To the extent that this gathering and coordination of

concepts, assumptions, and practices effects a series of translations in relation to

religious and cultural difference, it would appear that the neutrality assemblage

might be seen as an orientation to diversity in Bhabha's (1994, 1990) terms.

Given that such an orientation has been subject to far-reaching critique, the

warrants for neutrality are rendered problematic. How, then, might it be

possible to reconceive the project of sense-making in relation to religious and

cultural difference - after neutrality? Within what terms might an alternative

orientation to difference be articulated? And what might be some of the

pedagogical implications of this?

The critiques that have been entertained so far concern the production of

knowledge; to this extent, sense-making in relation to religious and cultural

difference is framed in primarily *epistemological* terms. However, we have also

seen that this project has been continually pressured by a series of *ethical*

concerns that exceed this framing. As Lingis (1989, 135) once put this: 'The other reaffirms his [sic] otherness in questioning me, disturbing the order of my perspectives and of my reasons, contesting me'. These ethical concerns become manifest both in the recognition of the limits of the approach being mobilized and the political questions raised by the multiple ways in which we become answerable to the other (Butler 2005).

Beyond these epistemological and ethical concerns, recent work has also questioned the implied *ontological* neutrality that informs such accounts too. It is characteristic of Euro-American accounts to assume that nature is 'one' whereas culture is taken to be 'many'; different cultures are understood to offer different representations of this one underlying reality (Henare *et al.* 2007). In other words, these cultural representations are taken to be so many different epistemological accounts without challenging the possibility that the *ontology* presumed to be underlying this is of a singular nature. That reality pre-exists our performances and is one, is taken as an apodictic statement: it is 'obviously the case', and some version of this continues to inform most western approaches to cultural difference (Law 2004). And yet it is precisely *this* assumption that is called into question in a number of writings that have brought together a concern with materiality and performance (Barad 2007). This has enabled a new concern with how ontologies are collectively produced in and through the enactments that constitute particular folds.

A case in point would be Mol's (1999, 2002) work on ontological politics in medical contexts that draws attention to the ways in which particular ontologies

are constituted in and through their performance. The notion of a politics suggests that things could be otherwise; in Mol's (1999, 75) words:

> If the term 'ontology' is combined with that of 'politics' then this suggests that the conditions of possibility are not given. That reality does not precede the mundane practices in which we interact with it, but is rather shaped within these practices. So the term *politics* works to underline this active mode, this process of shaping, and the fact that its character is both open and contested.

Characteristic Euro-American ontological assumptions about there being a single reality 'out there' that pre-exists our performances are continually reinscribed; even when evidence is produced that might seem to point in a different direction, such as when a disease like atherosclerosis is enacted differently in different hospital settings, procedures are introduced that restore these foundational assumptions (Mol 2002).

What is taken to be 'reality' is not independent of the various apparatuses and performances that are routinely used in its production (Barad 2007). These necessarily 'diffract' how sense is produced – and the kind of sense that is made. Within a school context, therefore, a concept such a *mokṣa*, is not independent of the material writing practices, analogies, narratives and gestures that are gathered together in the making of its sense. Rather than seeing such material practices as peripheral to the achievement of some disembodied understanding, acknowledging their material significance is to attend to how *this* assemblage

diffracts *this* sense in *this* particular context – in fulfillment of this particular purpose. Change the nature of this assemblage to form a new apparatus, and a different diffraction pattern is performed, even though such variations are conventionally taken to produce 'the same' phenomenon across multiple sites.

Encounters with certain traditional cultures have led to the questioning of a series of further assumptions about what it is to make sense. Traditional cultures 'have ontologies that make modern assumptions about knowledge and knowing look strange' (Verran 2005, 12). 'Doing ontics', as Verran (2007) conceives this, is the attempt to both recognize how practices are enmeshed in producing particular accounts of the real whilst also opening up other possibilities once a given ontological performance is recognized as being only one of multiple alternatives. It is clear from this work that a rhetorics of neutrality enacts a pluralist ontological framing since it assumes there is one reality out there which different cultural traditions describe differently. Were reality to be seen as *multiple* it would be possible to acknowledge that different realities might be produced in and through different performative assemblages.

The Yolngu of northeast Arnhem provide an example of what this might mean in practice. Yolngu Aboriginal knowledge traditions acknowledge different ways of 'doing place' according to the situation in hand. In regard to land management practices, such as firing a given territory, for example, Aboriginal clan members collectively perform places in ways that parallel the kinds of pragmatic ordering that would be recognised by a western practitioner. However, this is not the only way of doing place: an account can also be given in terms of 'the dreamtime'

(*Wangarr*) in which these activities are related to stories of ancestors. This is a way of doing place in which specific activities are never closed but always open to an imaginary that is at all times present and ongoing. These are ways of 'doing ontics' that are not restricted in scope to one account of the real and which acknowledge how place is constituted differently in and through these different enactments.

Recognition that senses of realness are intimately bound up with particular enactments suggests that a focus of enquiry and analysis might be the rituals and practices in and through which we 'do' our worlds (Verran 2007, 14). This marks a shift in orientation from 'world-views', which imply detached cognitive representations of a phenomenon over which judgment is made, to 'world-making', in which material enactments are foregrounded (Henare *et al.* 2007). Furthermore, an openness to imaginaries that cannot be resolved into familiar Euro-American co-ordinates bring with them ontological disjunctions that surprise, undo, reframe, and creates gaps; these, in turn, may provide opportunities to think and imagine differently.

Towards a Pedagogy of Difference: acts and becomings

'Doing ontics' has potentially far-reaching consequences for a pedagogy of religious and cultural difference, firstly, as regards its orientation to the significance of material practices, and secondly, in the challenge this poses to the dominant constructivist paradigm which tends to minimize ontological

disjuncture through emphasizing sameness and equivalence. It is generally

accepted that good educational practice is to build bridges from what a learner

knows already as a basis for acquiring new knowledge. This is to draw upon the

scaffold metaphor associated with Bruner (1990) with its presumption that

learning might be thought of as akin to the construction of a building. However,

acknowledging multiple ontologies – and their politics – is to problematise the

singularity of the framing presumed with such learning-as-building approaches.

It may be that the experience of ontological disjunction associated with folding in

that which resists resolution into familiar terms, is a necessary consequence of

encountering difference *as difference* – rather than as diversity, which, as we

have seen, is where the new is dispersed within the familiar. The *gap* which such

an acknowledgement creates, interrupts what might otherwise appear to be a

seamless translation into pre-given coordinates. Its resolution will not come

through appeal to what is *already known* but only through the invention of new

ways of going on. Its sense, in other words, is emergent, and involves in Bal's

(2006) terms a 'critical intimacy' with the objects of encounter. Such practices

have parallels with the kinds of attentiveness that Knorr Cetina (2001) describes

as being characteristic of the relationship between research scientists and their

'epistemic objects'. These objects are necessarily partial, since they are not

known in advance, or independently of the apparatus in and through which they

become manifest. To this extent, such objects are characterized by:

> a lack in completeness of being that takes away much of the wholeness,
>
> solidity, and the thing-like character they have in our everyday conception.
>
> The everyday viewpoint, it would seem, looks at objects from the outside as

one would look at tools or goods that are ready to hand or to be traded

further. These objects have the character of closed boxes. In contrast,

objects of knowledge appear to have the capacity to unfold indefinitely.

(Knorr Cetina 2001, 181)

Making sense is therefore an iterative and experimental practice. Such objects of

knowledge, because they are always materially unfolding and being defined in

different ways, can never be fully attained. A more fluid approach to the

exploration of culture is one of the consequences of this in which the (partial)

objects of knowledge in turn 'structure desire, and provide for the continuation

and unfolding of object-oriented practice' (Knorr Cetina 2001, 185). So how

might such a pedagogy of difference that is attentive to such 'talking back' - and

talking forward - be characterized? Here a series of acts and becomings are

suggested that might be seen as indicative of such an orientation.

Acts of reading

The recognition that there are different planes of sense, each with their

associated enactments, gestures towards an enlarged understanding of literacy

practices in which multiple literacies feature (Masny and Cole 2009). The

problematisation of neutral planes of sense-making also extends to a 'reading' of

the spaces (Certeau 1986, 193ff.) within which a pedagogy of difference is

performed. The effects that institutional orientations have upon knowledge

practices tend to be insufficiently recognised (Wortham 1999). Acknowledging

the 'grammar of schooling' is to attend to the various ways in which educational

spaces actively produce certain kinds of subjects and kinds of knowledge,

whether in the context of schools' governance (Hunter 1994, 1996) or in universities (e.g. Blake *et al.* 1998; Readings 1996; Strathern 2000). 'Reading' a space is to acknowledge that sense-making in relation to religious and cultural difference has to take up the contours of a particular space in the accounts that are fashioned (Knott 2005). Such a reading might become possible through, for example, the juxtaposition of two distinct semiotic domains (Gee 2007), such as home and classroom, which might begin to explore how the 'same' film or game is experienced differently in each context. Enquiry into how this differs and what it is that gives rise to these differences can begin to acknowledge the specificity of place and the ways this influences the kinds of sense that are made [4].

Such acts of reading might extend to the ways in which a given building 'functions as a reminder, a cue, a machine for thought' (Carruthers 1998, 226) where instructive contrasts might be drawn between the design inherent in a religious building, such as a church, and a shopping mall. Mapping these different spatial imaginaries permits questions as to how attention is oriented within these buildings, and enables critical analysis of their respective purposes and effects.

Acts of connection

The acknowledgement that sense-making is not necessarily about the production of 'out-thereness' enables a renewed focus upon the classroom as literally a 'face-to face' (Edgoose 2001): as an eventful place of encounter and potential insight. In place of an economy of representation (Thrift 2008) that de-eventualises actual encounters (Harrison 2002), a pedagogy of difference acknowledges that

it is in and through these material performances and relationships that difference is encountered and sense is made. These acts of connection include the multiple planes of sense that are gathered and coordinated and the multiple surfaces – of body, text, and screen - that together constitute these assemblages of enunciation. A bodily gesture, the use of voice to suggest an analogy, the writing of text upon a page, the use of digital technologies, are all different semiotic means in and through which senses are connected and realities produced (Kress *et al*. 2001). Such acts of connection gesture towards a concern with performance over a more limited concern with representation.

Sørensen (2007, 2009) has drawn out some of the differences between 'representational validity', on the one hand, and 'performative validity' on the other. Representational validity tends to privilege predetermined and stabilized forms of understanding such as those encountered in a 'container' approach to religions and cultures, where these are addressed in terms of knowledge of 'the Five Pillars' or 'the Five K's', for example. Representational validity tends to be privileged in schools because there are strong pressures on teachers to account for how pupils are doing; but the price of such forms of validity, as we have seen, is a forgetfulness of events and the connections that make these possible. Performative validity attends to the different forms of *presence* within the classroom and as such is interested in more open-ended, experimental and processual ways of making sense that attend to the significance of events.

Acts of invention

If a pedagogy of difference is not to be characterized by practices that conform to

pre-determined understandings that are established in advance, it will of necessity involve acts of invention in which new associations and articulations emerge. Such acts may emerge from ways in which newly encountered concepts, practices, or material objects are mobilized in relation to a series of new problematics – whether within religious studies or in relation to other disciplinary fields – or they may be produced by the 'disequilibrium' that encounter with difference can produce (Deleuze 1998, 113). In place of settled and decontextualised understandings that change little from one year to the next, sense-making here involves mobilizing concepts in the context of contemporary issues, events, and matters of concern, and considering what effects this might have and where this might lead.

New practices of sense-making may in turn derive from engaging new technologies such as video-games. In this connection, it may be that the kinds of patience that a player has to exercise in relation to games (such as *Zelda*) where the way forward is radically undetermined, may parallel the kinds of living in uncertainty involved in attending radically to new cultural phenomena (Johnson 2001, cited in Thrift 2004a). Such practices are necessarily open and experimental and may involve practices of 'diffraction' in which a new phenomenon is 'palpated' through seeing the effects that it produces on other relationships and entities (Haraway 1997; Barad 2007; May 2005).

Becoming critical

Becoming critical is necessary lest sense-making practices become routine and settled – unproblematically – within existing terms. A particular focus is likely to

be the multiple ways in which complexity is reduced in educational settings (Biesta 2008). Where these forms of complexity reduction work to close down the possibility of 'doing ontics', together with the acts of invention and connection that are intrinsic to such enactments, then practices of critique are necessary in order to open spaces for the incoming of the new. The upshot of such practices is the enabling of 'a critical relation to the truth regime on which one lives' (Butler 2005, 122). Without such a practice of critique, which is attentive to ways in which closure is produced, it is possible that the encounter with cultural difference will inadvertently reproduce the very Euro-American ontological assumptions with which the enquiry began.

Becoming responsible

Doing ontics inaugurates new practices of ethical responsibility in relation to both things and persons. To this extent, engaging with religious and cultural difference is premised upon what Thrift (2004b, 92) has described as a 'politics of imaginative generosity'. Becoming responsible has both distal and proximate dimensions. Responsibility extends to those who are present and in becoming response-able to multiple forms of the real as these are presented. To this extent such responsibility exceeds the limits imposed by forms of representational validity, that are de-contextualised and concern no-one - and no-thing - in particular.

Becoming other

One of the consequences of moving beyond a framing of neutrality is that it is acknowledged that our identifications are constantly being performed and that

material acts of encounter will issue in subjectivising consequences. Enquiring, analyzing, comparing, evaluating and producing are all becomings, and, in so far as these make a difference, will act back upon the learner in question. This is to conceive educational contexts as rhetorical spaces where 'knowledge and subjectivity are reciprocally constitutive' and in which, 'discourse becomes *poeisis*, a way of representing experience, reality, that remakes and alters it in the process' (Code 1995, ix, x). In so far as engaging religious and cultural difference involves 'troublesome knowledge' (Perkins 2006) that both interrupts and disrupts how we relate to knowledge and to ourselves (Beaudoin 2003), some kind of work upon the self is a corollary of this becoming other (Foucault 1988; Rose 1996).

Conclusion: after neutrality

This paper has argued that a rhetorics of neutrality is a distinctive assemblage of concepts, enactments and orientations that have become naturalized as the default approach to making sense of religious and cultural difference within a number of educational domains. Making sense of religious and cultural difference via an approach premised upon neutrality has a number of affordances. This has enabled the formation of a distinct subject area with knowledge practices that are recognizably aligned with modernist economies of sense-making that privilege certainty, systematicity and rationality, that are still prevalent in many educational contexts (Toulmin 1990; I'Anson 2004). The plane of sense-making and forms of knowledge practices entailed by this are

accessible and involve forms of complexity reduction (Biesta 2008) that renders cultural difference amenable to western logics of sense. But it is precisely this 'fit' that has been rendered problematic by a series of theoretical developments during the past forty years, some of which have been considered here.

Recent work in the social sciences has destabilised this settlement and this has a number of consequences. In the first place, claims to neutrality are rendered suspect; surfacing the multiple enactments that constitute neutrality's plane of sense-making is to both denaturalize such performances and to acknowledge the exclusions produced in and through these very performances. Secondly, work in feminist, post-colonial and Science and Technology studies calls into question neutrality's privileging of a detached epistemological standpoint as a basis for knowledge practices over an ethical framing that might acknowledge implication and response-ability. Thirdly, these new orientations in turn point to neutrality being nested within a set of Euro-American ontological assumptions that serve to translate difference within a pluralist framing rather than one that is open to the expression of multiplicity. The upshot of such critiques is to question the costs of the translation process that a rhetorics of neutrality brings in its train. This is to raise questions as to whether the neutrality assemblage still provides the right tools for the right job – or whether it is necessary to articulate new ways of going on.

It is in response to these challenges that a new orientation to difference has been articulated from a position that tries to do justice to the various material, performative, and ontological dimensions. For practices to be educationally

responsible it is no longer a requirement – or even a possibility - that these be construed as epistemologically neutral since *all* educational practices have subjectivising consequences. For such practices to be regarded as *educational* they need to be critically justified both as regards the ways in which they lead out - since 'to educate' derives from the Latin *educare* 'to lead or draw out' - and to ways in which this feeds back – in other words, to the differentiating effects of their encounter. To this extent educational practices associated with religious and cultural difference are necessarily iterative and experimental, in which a key focus is upon specific events of sense-making where new learning and insight become possible.

Notes

1. Episteme is Foucault's (2002) concept for describing the set of relationships that govern what can be said at a given time.
2. The concept of black box is a form of complexity reduction which enables one to overlook how a given process operates: the set of operations is bracketed so that only its effects are taken into account.
3. It is now widely recognized that sensory orientations differ markedly between cultures and may foreground senses which supplement the traditional five senses in the west (e.g., Geurts 2003).
4. Within a school context, spaces are also differentiated with the classroom and playground have very different affordances. Cf. Allan *et al.* (2005) for such a reading in relation to issues of inclusion.

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