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Cooling, T. (2015). Two ladies, one professor and a mouse. <i>Professional Reflection in RE Today</i> , 32(3), p49-52.
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## Two Ladies, One Professor and a Mouse: Epistemological Reflections on a Career in Religious Education

### Trevor Cooling

*Some of the most poignant pieces of writing that we have carried in this journal (and its predecessor, REsource) have been the result of inviting individuals who have made an outstanding contribution to the field to reflect on their life's involvement in RE. We are delighted to welcome Trevor Cooling to that list of torch-bearers.*

### The Early Formation of the Teacher

As a school leaver, I was a type; a public school graduate with strong Christian beliefs off to study biology at Cambridge. On my first day as a fresher I made a bee-line for the CICCUCU (Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union). And I stuck with CICCUCU, ending up, in my final year (1974), as the Chair to the university-wide mission where Nicky Gumbel, the founder of Alpha (an evangelistic, introductory course to Christianity which claims to have been used by 24 million people worldwide), became a Christian. I am also told that Gumbel's conversion led to the conversion of the current Archbishop of Canterbury. From about the age of 16 I had been active in Christian youth work and I never questioned that my calling in life was to continue that through becoming a teacher.

My final two years at Cambridge were on the innovative Education degree leading to qualified teacher status. My main teaching practice lasted 16 weeks. I was offered a choice of school; Clifton College, much like my own secondary school, Whitgift, or Banbury Comprehensive, then the largest comprehensive in England with 2000+ students. I had a very strong sense of calling to Banbury, so, despite huge apprehension about being a well-meaning-but-out-of-my-depth public school boy in a large comprehensive, I opted for challenge rather than comfort zone. I learnt a lot (understatement!) and was subsequently offered a job. That is how I came to be teaching biology in Banbury, where I met the first lady and the mouse who together changed my life (although the mouse was probably less significant than the lady). We met (the mouse and I) in a Year 7 lesson. I cannot remember the exact reason, but I was displaying him (actually, gender unknown) to the class in order to explain mammalian features and he bit me on a finger and would not let go. I had to retreat into the prep room and seek help from the technician. That was a moment of revelation – I was not cut out for a career as a biology teacher!

The lady was in my church, Banbury Baptist. Her name was Margaret and she was a primary school teacher about to embark on a degree in theology. Because I was known as a churchgoer, I had already been conscripted into teaching some RE. Despite the fact that I had not a clue what I was doing with Babylonian creation myths, I actually rather enjoyed my first encounter with RE. So the decision was made; I abandoned the mouse, married the lady and departed with her to Bible College to study for a London University Diploma in Theology. Diploma under my belt, I then became an RE teacher at Aylesbury Grammar School, soon progressing to Head of Department. Seven highly stimulating years of RE at the coalface (albeit a grammar school coalface) followed. My passion for Christian youth

work was undimmed and in my final year in Aylesbury I took on the Chair of Aylesbury Youth for Christ.

In the fifth of the seven years, I met the second lady. In the 1980s it was possible to secure a year's secondment to study for a masters' degree. In 1983 I was offered a place at Kings College London on an MA in RE, where I met Enid Mellor. The course that she had designed changed my whole perspective. Five years in the classroom had already convinced me that the focus of study in RE should be living faith rather than solely Scripture knowledge (which many syllabuses then still were), but Enid's course enabled me to gain a professional perspective that I had not had access to before. Two very important things happened. First I wrote my thesis on an evangelical Christian response to RE which was the beginning of a life-long fascination with how these two interact, and secondly I wrote an essay on Ronald Goldman's and Jerome Bruner's theories of learning. The reading for this essay was a revelation because my first lady, Margaret, was beginning to write materials for primary schools on teaching Christianity and I realised that her work embodied rejection of Goldman's notion of readiness and exemplified Bruner's conceptual, spiral curriculum approach. The thesis became my first academic article (Cooling, 1986) and my essay regenerated as the *Concept Cracking* approach (more of that soon).

### **The Shaping of the RE Professional**

As often happens, my secondment led to itchy feet; when the opportunity arose to lead Stapleford House (a small conference centre owned by the Association of Christian Teachers), we - that is Margaret and I - jumped at it. So in 1985 we found ourselves in a job share, responsible for a rather dilapidated former Methodist Chapel with a 13-bedroom extension located in a suburb of Nottingham. We were charged with the task of developing weekend courses for Christian teachers with the aim of helping them integrate their personal faith with their professional responsibilities. That role led to an amazing opportunity to develop a suite of diploma and masters' level, distance-learning courses for Christian RE teachers that were validated by Nottingham University and ran for nearly twenty years. The job share lasted 25 years. It was an experience worthy of a book, but amongst the many highlights, two stand out.

First is *Concept Cracking*. This arose out of frustration at the resistance there was in the 1980s to anything theological in RE because of the Goldmanian dogma that children are not ready for theology and the assumption that it harboured Christian confessionism (an opinion which sometimes persists today, e.g. Alberts, 2010 where *Concept Cracking* is deemed to be "implicitly confessional" [p. 282]). So we set about developing a rationale and materials to support a theologically conceptual approach to teaching Christianity in agreed syllabus RE. Over the years resources for teachers flowed from Margaret's keyboard, including the magazine *Cracking RE*, and she was kept busy leading courses all over the UK. I worked on the rationale, drafting for example, an article (Cooling & Cooling, 1987) whilst sitting in a hospital waiting room as Margaret endured day surgery and, later, a chapter for Michael Grimmitt's book on RE pedagogies (Cooling, 2000). In the early 1990s, I also found myself on the monitoring group for the Government's model RE syllabus development process. The then Minister of Education's promise had been that a *range of RE* syllabuses would be produced to support agreed syllabus development. Towards the end of the process, there was only one model on the table and I sheepishly suggested that we tried a conceptual model. Barbara Wintersgill, the Government's RE Officer, Stephen Orchard,

who headed up the equivalent of REToday Services, and I were charged with “having a go”. Model 2 was born on our dining room table at home and launched at a prestigious government event in 1993. That experience was exhilarating, but it shattered my faith in governmental initiatives in education, which, I had always assumed, were constructed in a carefully planned process by highly paid experts! To our astonishment, student teachers today are still taught *Concept Cracking* and teachers are using ideas that were generated on walks that Margaret and I enjoyed around the UK. Retrospectively, I think we would have made more of narrative theology and less of systematic theology were we to have developed this approach now.

The second highlight is the opportunity for ongoing reflection on the interaction between Christian faith and RE. In particular, I was very aware that evangelical Christians were suspect as far as many people in the RE community were concerned. Enter the professor; the chance to study for a doctorate with John Hull at Birmingham University was a life-changer. I was intrigued by his radical but deeply spiritual approach to theology, evidenced in his autobiographical writing and achieving masterly academic expression in his classic on Christian adult learning (Hull, 1985). This was my first real experience of working closely with someone that I profoundly disagreed with on a number of key points, but who I grew to love and respect. I learnt to honour a different theological position from my own as I witnessed profound Christian faith. I also experienced great magnanimity from Michael Grimmitt, who was the target of a detailed critique in my doctorate (Cooling, 1994), but was prepared to pass my thesis as my internal examiner. This experience taught me the importance of making true friends with those with whom one disagrees. I have since tried to practise that and have mostly found it reciprocated. My subsequent work as an officer of the Religious Education Council has convinced me of the importance, in the context of religious diversity, of people learning “to drink tea with each other” (in the spirit of Professor Mohamed El-Gomati who invited English Defence League protestors to drink tea with him when they targeted his mosque in York.)

### **The Twilight Years as Professor**

Bus pass and senior railcard now safely installed in my wallet, I find myself in a Church of England foundation university as Professor of Christian Education. My work is now largely focussed on supporting church school teachers in interpreting and implementing the aspiration that they should offer pupils a distinctively Christian learning experience. That has been the context for the development of a cross-curriculum, pedagogical approach called *What If Learning* ([www.whatiflearning.co.uk](http://www.whatiflearning.co.uk)). For some in the RE community such activity will be seen as problematic, tainted by confessional and faith-nurturing aspirations that are not deemed compatible with the secular approach to RE demanded by the religious diversity of modern society (Byrne, 2014). I disagree, and increasingly feel that the problem with the representation of religion in education today is that we perceive it as a threat to be tamed by reason (or perhaps by British values) rather than as a source of energy to be nurtured in the cause of promoting the common good. So I worry about an approach to RE which emphasises pupils’ learning about *worldview information* whilst never experiencing *worldview formation*. Too easily, I think, as RE teachers we view our classroom as a curriculum “green zone” where religion is made safe, rather than taking responsibility for how children experience religious and non-religious belief in the context of their whole-of-school experience (Cooling, 2012a). After many years in RE, I have come to the conclusion that our primary professional responsibility is that both teachers and pupils come to understand that

worldviews are of fundamental significance in our personhood, that we are responsible for what and how we believe, and that we should nurture those beliefs as a force for good and learn how to “drink tea” in a world where animosity is sadly so often the response to diversity and where we seem increasingly to fear the more conservative approaches to religion.

When Bill Gent asked me to write this piece, he described it as a retrospective. That is recognition of having reached a certain age! But it also implies what is, in the academic research world, called reflexivity. So, what have I learnt about myself in writing this article? Two things:

First, it has enhanced my belief that where we end up as professionals is inextricably intertwined with our personal history (Ina ter Avest, 2012). We are all products of our life-context and life-experiences and the decisions that we have made in response to those. We are not as much the products of unimpeded autonomous choice as we like to believe, but we are certainly accountable for our responses to the nurturing that we have received. What is often most important is the quality of the personal encounters that we have experienced. So I am deeply grateful for, amongst others, the two ladies, the professor, and, not to forget him (or her?), the mouse. My professional life is shaped by my teenage and student encounters with evangelical Christianity, but in a way that is significantly influenced by my immersion in the RE world and the stimulation of encountering religious diversity. I am still proud to describe myself as an evangelical, although I accept that legitimate criticisms can be made of certain attitudes and behaviour (Maddox, 2014). I have no desire to defend the indefensible; no community is guiltless.

Which leads to my second point. Now a pensionable evangelical, I reflect that there is both continuity and discontinuity with my teenage and student evangelicalism. I have not left it behind and “matured into” liberalism, radicalism or atheism (as some think should happen), but I have moved on from some of the attitudes and beliefs that I once affirmed. Recently I have been particularly helped by the writings of Bishop Tom Wright, the former Bishop of Durham, now an academic theologian at St Andrews University. His observation that some traditional evangelical ideas are “insufficiently biblical” (Wright, 2012, p.9) resonated with something that has troubled me for many years.

As a second year undergraduate at Cambridge, I took a course on the philosophy of science - another life-changing experience. I was introduced to Karl Popper, Michael Polanyi, Imre Lakatos and Thomas Kuhn, to name but a few. I learnt one thing that had never struck me before – that our encounter with reality “out there” is always mediated through human interpretation. This constructivist insight did not turn me into a relativist, but it did make me aware that human knowledge is fallible (notice I did not say it was *unreliable*) because it is always human interpretation. Before this I had been a naïve realist (or, as some refer to this position, a modernist or positivist) both in my understanding of science and of my evangelical Christian faith. Basically that meant that once, if I knew something to be true, I assumed that that was, simply, that! The only thing left to do was to enlighten everyone else with the truth! At Cambridge I was converted through the philosophy of science to a 40-year journey of what I now understand as being a critical realist. I think Andrew Wright, formerly of Kings College, and I discovered critical realism at about the same time in our doctoral studies, and I am delighted that he has gone on to develop it at such depth and with such rigour (e.g. Wright, 2013) as well as recognising the shared influence (Wright, 1997). This critical realist journey has been significantly nurtured by my experience of being part of the

RE community where diversity is the bread and butter of daily life. So, from being a modernist, naïve realist evangelical Christian as a teenager and student I am now, as I look forward to my pension, a critical realist, evangelical Christian who is committed to the principles of good RE in dealing with diversity (Jackson, 2014). This does not change my belief that the Bible is the authoritative source for life, but it does make me aware that my understanding of biblical teaching is always a potentially fallible interpretation and that biblical truth can easily be distorted when read through the lens of my own cultural perspective and my own personal interests. So, I am now more aware of the risk of being “insufficiently biblical”. But like critical realist scientists who seek to discover truth about the world, I do believe that Christians can have “proper confidence” (Newbigin, 1995) that we can discover “God’s truth”; but this confidence must always be tempered by a willingness to be challenged and an attitude of humility arising from awareness of the fallibility and partiality of our human interpretations of our sacred text. And I think that makes a huge difference to my approach as a Christian RE teacher (Cooling, 2013).

This leads me to an odd place as an RE professional. Because I am a critical realist evangelical rather than a modernist, naïve realist evangelical, I no longer feel compelled to be only a promoter of my own understanding of Christian faith; I hope I have learnt the importance of being a listener to and fellow-traveller with those of other persuasions. So I love diversity. But the irony is that I think I am now a passionate evangelist when it comes to critical realism! I think it’s the way knowledge actually is! For example, when I ponder my critique of the epistemology of the British Humanist Association (Cooling, 2010) or my recent debate with Michael Hand (Cooling, 2012b), I see myself evangelising with the gospel of critical realism! And why is that? I think it’s because I believe that critical realists are more likely to be able to drink tea well with others.

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