Introduction

A chain of learning about religion and belief

Many have observed a return of religion and belief to the public sphere (see, for example, Dinham et al, 2009; Micklethwaite and Wooldridge, 2009). As a key voice in this debate, Habermas (2005: 26) notes ‘a postsecular self-understanding of society as a whole in which the vigorous continuation of religion in a continually secularizing environment must be reckoned with’. His assertion relies on several elements: the continued expansion of religion globally and its power to shape culture and politics, as well as individual behaviour; the inherent discrimination of a one-size-fits-all secular vision of the public sphere that requires religious citizens to modify their religious identity; and the struggle of liberal democracies to challenge the materialism of global capitalism (Habermas, 2005). Liberal democracies, says Habermas, need to rediscover the wisdom, discernment and discipline that are linked with ‘pre-political’ religious sources because they are independent and self-generating, beyond the influence of both state and market.

With or without an interest in such wisdoms, migration and globalisation ensure the increasing diversity of religion and belief everywhere anyway, and the challenges of such encounters are unavoidable. While critics have argued that the ubiquitous nature of the term ‘post-secular’ risks its devaluation (Beckford, 2012), it nevertheless captures the persisting, pervasive, fluid and uncertain nature of religion and belief in public space. The renewed visibility of a religiously plural public sphere, characterised by more blurred and fluid encounters, is one of the hallmarks of the current policymaking and practice context.

At the same time, Hervieu-Leger argues that for religion to be understood in the modern world, there must be a connection to its deep roots in traditions and times in which it was not defined as irrelevant. This leads her to the concept of a ‘chain of memory’ by which individual believers become members of a community linking past, present and future (Hervieu-Leger, 2000). She also argues that modern secular societies in the West have neither fully outgrown nor found secular substitutes for religious traditions. Modern societies have become ‘amnesiacs’, she thinks, forgetting the chain of memory that binds them to their religious pasts and brings them to their presents. The irony, she suggests, is that at the very moment when that memory is most lost, a growing appetite for some sort of ‘spiritual’ life is
emerging, and what is opening up is a space that religion and belief might distinctively fill.

This book picks up on Hervieu-Leger’s ‘chain of memory’ to consider a different sort of chain in relation to religion and belief – a chain of learning – which might also be needed as the secular or post-secular wrestle with the reality of a religiously pervaded world. This addresses horizontal connections in the here and now, as well as vertical ones to the past and future. What we know about religion and belief is based on what we learn about them, and we do that learning in a variety of spaces and settings, which are contested and compete with each other. In formal educational spaces, like schools, colleges and universities, this takes place in ‘subjects’ or disciplines, like religious studies, theology, philosophy and citizenship. These present a muddled mix of Christian socialisation, personal and spiritual formation, the empirical study of religion and belief phenomena, and a preoccupation with public policy anxieties about cohesion and extremism. The content, structure and purposes are unclear. More recently, we might add subjects with little sense of a direct or past connection to religion or belief, like geography and law (see Baker and Dinham, 2017), which focus on how diverse publics mix, and how this plays out in debates or disputes.

Outside of them are semi-formal learning spaces, especially professions and workplaces, which emphasise religion and belief in relation to service provision and employment practices. Likewise, learning takes place in informal spaces, which we often call ‘communities’. These emphasise faith-based volunteering and cohesive citizenship. They each reflect varying perspectives on religion and belief from which we learn to think about what, if anything, to do about them.

Each learning space is itself shaped by what policy is seeking: welfare might frame religion and belief in terms of their contributions to care (Putnam, 2000; Dinham, 2015a); security and foreign affairs might emphasise religion in terms of extremism and sectarianism (Francis and van Eck Duymaer, 2015); education might think of the importance of socialising young people in schools for a Christian and multi-faith society (Clarke and Woodhead, 2015; Dinham and Shaw, 2017); while university and employment policy might emphasise workplace readiness for religion and belief diversity and inclusion (Crisp, 2016; Aune et al, 2019). Each of these framings has its own inner logic, including normativities, which variously broadly construct religion and belief as both positive (contributing to society) and negative (a threat to it). However, do these ‘logics’ line up? Are they sufficiently in touch with each other to, at least, be capable of coherent disagreement?
As individuals pass through these spaces of learning, what messages are they taking in at different times and places, and are they cogent? At the core of this book is the suggestion that publics struggle with religion and belief, and that this is, at least in part, because of the competing, and sometimes conflicting, messages that we get about them. Why should we know about religion and belief, and where? How should we think about them, and who are the religious and believers anyway? Is there a chain of learning about religion and belief that could give an overall sense of the religion and belief landscape and how to think about it, that is, a series of links, each of which makes sense in relation to the others, even where they contest? Can this be bought into focus, or are the messages inherent in each destined to remain a muddle, at odds with the others, breaking the chain and leaving us bewildered and confused?

A broken chain and the problem of religion and belief literacy

These questions are at the core of what I have previously called a ‘religious literacy’ deficit (see Dinham, 2011). This key concept is put forward as an issue for everyone, regardless of their own religion, belief or none, and the chapters that follow argue that religious literacy is best addressed through a chain of learning that is connected up across the spheres in which publics converge and learn: schools, universities, the professions, workplaces and communities. The book explores how this chain is currently broken, reflecting the emergence of a
muddle of ideas about religion and belief without internal or overall coherence. This is not to say that a diversity of perspectives is invalid; indeed, it is welcomed. However, the relationships and boundaries between them need clarity and critique if they are not to present as simply contradictory, muddled and bewildering. In the absence of such clarity, this book reveals varying combinations of loose conceptions of society as secular, not sacred, of religion and belief as private, not public, and of religious people and believers as either heroes or villains. The book explores how these binary assumptions are reflected in and reproduced by the policies that frame each sphere of learning, and then how they play out in practice. The reframing of these policies is explored as the basis for challenging their own underlying assumptions, and making sense of each other’s perspectives in a newly reconnected chain of learning.

This brings together a body of research on religious literacy since around 2010 and responds to a growing number of calls for more religious literacy from a wide range of spheres. In the UK, these include the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life (2015), A New Settlement in Religious Education (2015), the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (Dinham and Shaw, 2013), a number of national government departments, and the heart of government and policy in 10 Downing Street. These calls are echoed in the US, Australia and Europe, where migration and globalisation increase the visibility of, but not necessarily the ability to engage well with, religion and belief.

This is also a time at which new courses in the study of religion as a contemporary challenge are emerging in university departments across the developed world. These are often called ‘religion and society’, or similar, and include a wide range of perspectives, mostly from theology, religious studies and sociology, but also from politics, professional studies, education studies and media studies. Many are preoccupied with Islam, betraying an anxiety that risks adding to the ‘othering’ of Muslims.

**Religion and belief literacy**

At the same time, the language of religious literacy implies religion, in the singular, and does not refer to belief at all. It is challenged by the elasticity of lived religion and belief. The nomenclature has been debated in many conversations before. When the Religious Literacy Leadership Programme was established in 2010, the programme board wrestled with the label repeatedly, concluding in the end that no title
would fully capture what was meant and therefore that ‘religious literacy’ would do the job. I argued then that it operates adequately as a metaphor with language learning, which requires vocabulary but also grammar and narrative. Thus, just as language learning adds up to more than a mechanical process, the same might apply to how we approach religion and belief. I also argued that it operates, at the same time, as a practice, that is, as a way of engaging with the challenge of religion and belief diversity in a context that has lost its language on these issues. Those points remain but the ‘religious’ in ‘religious literacy’ has sometimes proved a barrier to precisely the opening up that the concept aims to enable. Too often, it is heard as an agenda for more religiousness, with a religious starting point and protagonists. It is also capable of a misconceived narrowing of the canvas of concerns to refer only to the established world of religious traditions. For me, this logic culminates in a shift in language from ‘religious literacy’ to ‘religion and belief literacy’. This book uses this wider term as an evolution of religious literacy. The addition of ‘belief’ is intended to make explicit the inclusion of the broadest range possible, which means the nine world religions, new and revived forms of religion and belief (such as Wicca and Druidism), spirituality, non-religious beliefs (like humanism and existentialism), non-religion, world views, and values. It also firmly places the endeavour in the context of a pluralist and constructivist conception of religions and beliefs that welcomes them all but commits to none. In this, the term more fully reveals the non-confessional – but not secular – starting foundation of the concept. Religion and belief literacy is not about more religion and belief, but about a better quality of conversation about the religions and beliefs that are everywhere anyway.

Modelling learning

A key observation in the chapters that follow is that religion and belief literacy is both socialised and learnt—that how and where we learn what both models and informs how we think about religion and belief. While treated in schools as a discrete and marginalised subject for children, at the same time, it overlaps with citizenship and sex education, and is colonised in communities with anxious policy instrumentalisations about migration and extremism. Thus, it will be experienced primarily in those ways rather than engaged with more openly as an ordinary part of billions of identities and lived experiences around the world.

Likewise, the book will show that learning about religion and belief is a lifelong process, to be engaged in by publics in schools, universities,
professional training, workplaces and communities, where everyone is a learner. Crucially, learning happens in different combinations, in different orders, with different modes, for different purposes and at different paces for each individual. Some sort of sharedness across the learning spheres, wherever one goes next, would help, even where that sharedness highlights the disagreements. This sets up religion and beliefs themselves as open modes of learning and exploration, to be approached and explored from all sorts of angles and experiences. In this perception, they are not flat, unmovina, doctrinal and fixed. This reflects the importance of connecting the chain of learning across all the spaces through which people pass in everyday life so that the fullest range of thinking and contestations about religion and belief landscapes are more or less consistently revealed in their complexity and by recognising the boundaries and competitions between ideas. Instead of muddle, we might find clarity, though certainly also complexity.

The chapters

In Chapter 1 the book considers the problem of religion and belief literacy and its origins, locating it as a 20th-century challenge arising out of a willing transfer of care and education from churches to the state after the Second World War. Now well in to the 21st century, how can a new visibility of religion and belief meet a public sphere that had thought itself secular, and how does what we learn about religion and belief help and hinder?

Chapter 2 turns to the overarching themes framing religion and belief in 21st-century public policy. This reveals a long gap from around 1945 to about 2000 when religion and belief were barely noticed in the public sphere, underpinned by vaguely secular assumptions. At the same time, the religion and belief landscape was changing dramatically, just as few people were watching. What seemed to subsequently burst back into public prominence was a preoccupation with religion and belief as deeply problematic. This has landed in policy approaches focused predominantly on extremism, cohesion and equality, each designed to manage the risk.

The next six chapters explore how these overarching policy themes are reflected in key spaces of learning: two in schools (Chapter 3 on religious education [RE] and Chapter 4 on religion and belief in the wider life of schools); two on universities (Chapter 5 on operations and Chapter 6 on teaching and learning); one on workplaces and the professions (Chapter 7, focusing on health and social care settings in
particular); and one on community learning (Chapter 8, focused on cohesion and extremism initiatives and out-of-school settings).

The final chapter brings together the themes in an attempt to summarise what each learning sphere suggests to us about religion and belief, drawing attention to the inconsistencies and confusions, as well as how they might helpfully be ironed out. A religion and belief literacy analysis is applied to explore how the chain of learning might be reconnected.