

# Between the Letter and Spirit: Religion, Reduction, and Poetic Formation

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## INTRODUCTION: THE AMBIVALENCE OF REDUCTION

In the field of religious studies, reductionism has a long and chequered history.<sup>1</sup> One can broadly characterise reductive theories of religion as displaying two explanatory tendencies: naturalistic and cultural reductionism.<sup>2</sup> Both natural and cultural theorising reduce religious phenomena and experience by imposing interpretive frames. Since there are no conclusive means of determining which frames reveal, and which conceal, we might be better off acknowledging that, as Heidegger put it, every revealing is a concealing.<sup>3</sup> In other words, every theoretical framing shows something about the phenomena, without ever exhausting what can be shown. We are placed, then within an interpretive circle that is properly the subject of hermeneutics.

Of course, reductive theories of religion hold great appeal precisely because they have explanatory power. On the other hand, attempts to resist reductionism draw on the distinction between explanation and understanding: that explanations fail to get to, or actively inhibit, understanding. This article is an attempt to complicate this kind of dichotomy by developing the implications of a conception of education as productively and intrinsically reductive. The question that this article seeks to explore is: what kinds of reduction are appropriate to education and, more specifically, religious education?<sup>4</sup> I ask this because, as I will go on to argue, education largely relies on something like a pedagogical reduction: the processes of selection, simplification and generalisation that educators use in helping students learn. If this is true, then the challenge is to distinguish when and how pedagogical reductions help or hinder understanding. The following account of reduction in education needs to be carefully considered alongside the ambivalence around reductionism in

religious studies, for it is not obvious that the same conception of reduction is at play in both contexts.

With these complications and caveats in mind, let us turn to the concept of the pedagogical reduction. Consider the following words of Jerome Bruner:

There is, perhaps, one universal truth about all forms of human cognition: the ability to deal with knowledge is hugely exceeded by the potential knowledge contained in man's [sic] environment. To cope with this diversity, man's perception, his memory, and his thought processes early become governed by strategies for protecting his limited capacities from the confusion of overloading. We tend to perceive things schematically, for example, rather than in detail, or we represent a class of diverse things by some sort of averaged "typical instance."<sup>5</sup>

Bruner's concern with perceptual selection, and of experiencing classes of things in relation to the experience of particular objects anticipates a connection that will be developed in this article between the individual (perception) and the universal or general (knowledge). I will explore the relation between particular objects and universal ideas, but not in the context of perception which is Bruner's concern here, but in the context of education. In other words, Bruner's account does not address the *pedagogical* reduction which, for the purposes of my argument, I define as *an intentional pedagogical move undertaken by an educator* (in contrast to a more unconscious perceptual reduction) – of course this raises complex questions around what is meant by intention (and how conscious we are of them). An important strand of my argument is that pedagogical reduction is intrinsic to the educational process. But in an age of espoused educational authenticity any notion of reduction in education is regarded with suspicion. It could be argued that such suspicions are loosely similar to the ambivalence of reduction in religious studies since both progressive educators and anti-reductionist religionists view the "authentic" experience of the educational or religious subject as authoritative.

The specific features of the process of pedagogical reduction are the selections and generalisations of complex features of the world for pedagogical

purposes. Pedagogical reduction refers both to the process of selection and simplification, as well as the commonplace objects that result from that process (i.e. particular images, texts and objects are themselves reductions). Any framing of a particular object or process, any pointing out of a particular event, or experience, as long as that framing or pointing out has pedagogical intent, may be called a pedagogical reduction. Textbooks are an obvious example since they select and simplify from complex phenomena, on behalf of the student for explicitly pedagogical purposes. The museum exhibit could be regarded as the organisation of objects and experiences in a “reduced” environment, using space and light in very particular, contrived ways. Teachers in schools, colleges and universities engage in reduction, providing students with environments, narratives, frameworks, and examples intended to make particular things easier to see and comprehend.<sup>6</sup> For example, one can read in Dewey’s definition of education as “attention to the conditions of growth”<sup>7</sup> the idea that such attention will entail selections, simplifications, and ultimately reductions. Of course, these kinds of selections entail significant normative considerations: what is explicitly and implicitly valued by the selection process, and whose interests are thereby served?<sup>8</sup> Although normative questions raise serious concerns, they do not change the basic structure of education as reduction. The anxiety that education is too concerned with abstraction, too often ignoring or real-world concerns and contexts, might go some way to explain a certain progressive emphasis on the particular through experiential education. Nevertheless, education does not make sense without the concept of the pedagogical reduction even where it goes unrecognised. Contemporary educational discourse is awash with ideas of levels, stages, accessibility, differentiation, personalisation and so on, ideas which assume that knowledge, however defined, needs to be rendered through different layers of sophistication and illustration, each layer entailing some kind of interpretive relation and reduction. It is generally assumed that students must be acquainted with foundational knowledge in order to be prepared for higher order skills and knowledges, and thus learning is understood as a staged process of engagement with diverse representations and reductions. Nevertheless, it has been argued that such self-conscious pedagogical framing or staging of the world was not widespread until the around the mid seventeenth century.

## THE TIME AND PLACE FOR PEDAGOGICAL REDUCTION

Klaus Mollenhauer has persuasively argued that a new pedagogical age dawned with John Comenius's 1658 publication, *Orbis Sensualism Pictus* (*The Visible World in Pictures*), often regarded as the first textbook for children. In broad terms, this age coincides with the early constructions of childhood. At this point, argues Mollenhauer, we see children not just being present to an adult world, but that the world is self-consciously re-presented to children by way of pedagogical reductions. Furthermore, Mollenhauer refers to the associated idea that classrooms became spaces for "pedagogical rehearsal": educational spaces are not "real world" since they are precisely set apart in order to offer students the opportunity to rehearse complex actions, knowledges, and attitudes before they are performed for "real." These processes of, and spaces for representation, reduction and rehearsal are vital to understanding the appropriate scope of pedagogical reductions. Indeed, Mollenhauer frames his discussion of Comenius around the key questions relevant to pedagogical reduction: "Of all the things there are to learn, which ones are truly important[?]" (selection) and "How can these be conveyed with the needed clarity[?]"<sup>10</sup> (simplification). What, then, is Comenius' relation to these questions, and why are they important to Mollenhauer? Determining what is (or is not) important, is part of showing the world since every pedagogical showing entails interpretive judgement. This interpretive role within pedagogy further illustrates the idea that reduction and rehearsal are understood as central features of education, rather than inauthentic distractions to be avoided or apologised for. Recognising the positive role of reduction and rehearsal is vital because, as suggested earlier, it is not uncommon among progressive educators in particular, at least since Dewey, to claim that education should strive for authentic experience of the world, and that the educational space should be, as far as possible, continuous with, or indistinguishable from, a putative real world. For Dewey himself, the concept of the pedagogical reduction was a familiar notion though framed in terms of an educational environment being a selective and simplified form of the adult world.<sup>11</sup>

It is essential to the reduction that, through selection, it determines on behalf of the student, what is worthy of attention and interest. In other words, pedagogical reductions are constructed because they are thought to mediate principles, ideas, and processes more effectively. Though a notoriously complex and controversial idea, this could provide some criteria for distinguishing “higher” from “lower” cultural forms, through the curation of a canon; a perspective on, not so much as the oft quoted phrase of Matthew Arnold has it “the best that has been thought and said”,<sup>12</sup> but *exemplary* episodes in history and culture.<sup>13</sup> Much as progressive educators might seek to disavow the authority of the teacher in determining the orientation of the student in this way, or critical pedagogues might draw attention to the hegemonic nature of this selection process or of evaluative ascriptions of “high art”,<sup>14</sup> this view of pedagogical reduction seems both irresponsible and impossible to entirely disavow, and indeed, something that the student hopes for, if not quite demands of the teacher. To further illustrate the point, let me turn to the subject teaching, from history to religious education, to show how reduction operates in practice.

### PEDAGOGICAL REDUCTIONS IN PRACTICE

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle says that history concerns only the particular, while poetry is distinguished by its concern for the universal.<sup>15</sup> This argument might be convincing in reference to history itself, but when examining the teaching of history, things look different. Drawing on Mollenhauer’s point that education directs the student to what the teacher thinks is important or appropriate at any given stage, the history teacher’s concern is less the particulars than the principles that those particulars point to. Children cannot learn about every historical event or detail, and so educators generally introduce students to some exemplary historical moments: for instance, the events of a particular conflict or revolution. The point is that the details illustrate something significant that the teacher wishes the student to understand. The details of the particular event may well be less important than the more general, universal themes. For instance, teaching about the suffragettes, about civil rights, or about British rule in India might all be used to illustrate the fragility and contingency of our notions

of democracy and justice, or might be used for darker purposes: to reinforce certain nationalist narratives and ideologies. Here historical detail becomes the vehicle for making broader points. The details may add a certain colour, texture or interest, and may have important mnemonic significance, but the real *lesson* of the lesson is more general. The task of the educator is to seek out the most exemplary form of the principle at stake and make selections based on that. On this definition, one might understand pedagogical reductions to be expedients: not particularly valuable in themselves, but offering ways to manage and filter the huge excess of historical detail.

This basic structure, that reductions refer to ideas beyond themselves, is evident across a range of educational curricula: scientific principles are illustrated by particular experiments; the nature of number and calculation, by exercises in particular sums; the relations of harmony through particular pieces of music and so on. Each exemplary episode appears directed to the ascent of the mind from particular to universal. Thus, what I present here as a reduction might just as well be termed an *expansion*. If pedagogical reductions are oriented to the comprehension of general principles, then such comprehension will allow the student to see more, or further. Pedagogical reductions actually widen the schema of perception: an understanding of the principles of evolution will enable us to notice the world in more detail, to observe with finer attention since more detailed phenomena “fit in” to rational schema; or our ears hear with greater clarity and depth the symphonic unity of the orchestra having isolated particular elements. Hence Bruner’s account of perceptual selection is surely relevant not only to how perceptions operate, but to the *educational formation* of perceptual schema themselves through intentional educational activities: in other words, it could describe the education, not just the operation, of the senses.

This move from particulars to universals appears to be a familiar process of induction, raising not just epistemological questions, but pedagogical questions. What is the teacher introducing the student to? What is made present in the pedagogical act? Is it the universal form? In the context of religious or philosophical understanding, how does this structure of reduction and expansion play out? In philosophy and ethics, the structure of ascent is not difficult

to see. Principles of morality or of ethical reasoning are illustrated by way of the particular ethical circumstances (often illustrated through such exemplary episodes as the famous trolley car scenarios). Similarly, it is not uncommon for particular religious histories to be interpreted through a structuralist lens or a social evolutionist framing: the nineteenth century idea that religion and myth evolved from magic and animism to polytheism, to monotheism, and finally to science, providing an interpretive schema which celebrates the crowning achievement of the interpreters.<sup>16</sup> But even the framing of certain phenomena as “religions”, or certain ideas as “beliefs”, demonstrates that framing of religious phenomena is itself a pedagogical reduction. Calling Hinduism one of the world’s great religions is sometimes criticised as too reductive.<sup>17</sup> The controversies around the status of Hindu culture as an “ism”, suggests not only that pedagogical reduction is at play, but that there is a lack of recognition that pedagogical reduction is playing, and inevitably must play, a role. The shriller reactions against the idea of Hinduism as a religion could be interpreted, at least to some extent, as a failure to appreciate the structure of reduction in providing pedagogically effective representations. This may be another example of the victors parading their own worldview. But the politics of reduction and generalisation are never far away: in 2015 India’s Prime Minister Modi said “The Supreme Court has said that Hindu dharam is not a religion but a way of life ... I believe the SC’s definition shows the way.”<sup>18</sup> Perhaps for Hindu nationalists, much is at stake with the reduction of Hinduism to a religion, especially in the context of a secular national constitution.

In developing this argument I have tried to show that pedagogical reduction is essential, and that its real orientation is towards principles of understanding, rather than particular pieces of knowledge. This might be better termed an expansion rather than reduction. This argument could lead us to say that educators ought to be careful when engaged in teaching religion, to point out that any perspective offered is only that, and that students should be cautious about what they take from their religious education. Although perfectly reasonable, this argument is only half right. It fails to appreciate that any kind of education is always engaged in an interpretive reduction, even in the most

sophisticated cases of understanding and that there is no way out of this interpretive condition. I argue that this interpretive condition does not preclude real understanding or encounter of a tradition, but rather that such understanding is always historically conditioned. But this condition of what Gallagher has called “moderate hermeneutics”<sup>19</sup>, it should be realised, is as good as it gets. In the next section I will complicate this account firstly by indicating that reductions invite a kind of dynamic relation that subverts tendencies to reify and secondly, by showing that the poles of the particular and the general are interlocked: they cannot be viewed as entirely distinct.

### THE WAY OF REDUCTION

This article has asked what kinds of reduction are appropriate to (religious) education. The question invites consideration of the relations between a student and a pedagogical reduction. Insofar as reductions are pointers, they are not simply truths to be transmitted into the minds of students, or directly taught and learned. It might be argued that modern mass education works on the basis that pedagogical reductions are, more or less, directly teachable and learnable. In other words, the student who masters the representations and reductions, and is able to reproduce that representation through structured assessment, is rewarded. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this process, insofar as we can remain aware of it and can recognise its limits: that is, if we can play the game without being played by it. The danger is, in a word, reification: taking the concrete form, to be the essence of education.

So, the issue here is not that pedagogical reductions are employed to understand certain things, but that those reductions are reified into the very object of learning itself. The reductions are taken to be the goal and terminus of education. It is not very controversial to draw attention to this reification, but this general awareness does not change the fact that education, for the most part, has become the management of representations and reductions as though they were, in themselves, the educational concern. This could be called *educational idolatry*. It ascribes ultimacy to that which is nothing other than a



“material” construction that stands for the actual and elusive substance of learning. It is not the existence or construction of educational idols that is the problem, but the idolatrous relationships that form between teachers, students and reductions. The task of teaching is, in no small part, the give and take of reductions; knowing how to deal with the idols of education. Once the student has an understanding of the textbook frame, a good teacher will draw attention to the limits of that frame, either sublimating or sometimes transgressing the boundaries that have been established.

Let me illustrate the point in a different context. Pedagogical reductions might be regarded rather like the stages of Christian prayer practiced by the religious novice for whom outward, oral prayer is an important stage or vehicle for an experience of the deeper practices of silent mystical prayer.<sup>20</sup> If such a comparison is at all helpful, it is because we recognise in the reduction a relation that transports the student. The textbook simplification serves to carry the student in a particular direction, and just as outward prayer has its place, so the textbook has a role. Both the textbook and the outward prayer are neither right nor wrong, rather are formative of a relation between the student and some thing. In both contexts that relation holds only as far as it is productive, and must, when the time is right, be reinterpreted, sublimated, or even cast aside (as Meister Eckhart advised concerning outward prayer<sup>21</sup>).

I have suggested that an important role of the teacher must be to know how and when to complicate the pedagogical reduction, or draw attention to problems that stretch beyond it. In some cases, what has been done must be undone. What has been formed must be transformed. At this point the reference to mysticism seems quite direct. This is because mysticism is often understood as involving something like a theological dialectic in which our capacities to figure the sacred must be transfigured. In other words, the names for God, proposed, for instance, in the fifth/sixth century mystic Dionysius the Areopagite's *Mystical Theology*, must be negated.<sup>22</sup> By way of this *via negativa*, which unsays what has been said, we come closer to understanding (or to God).<sup>23</sup> There is a particular aspect of mysticism that enables this dialectic: namely the poetic or metaphorical nature of mystical language. Here language is not right or wrong, but speaks in

a way that moves. And it is this movement that is pedagogically significant. It is not a content that is known conceptually, but a movement that is potentially transformative. I suggest that this is possible through the manner in which poetic language enables the particular and the universal to work together; the reifications are self-subverting. The idea that mysticism entails the self-subverting utterance has been argued by the contemporary theologian Denys Turner, who points to Dionysius' expressions for God: such as "a brilliant darkness" or a "hidden silence" to illustrate a language which subverts itself.<sup>24</sup> At the level of propositional logic, it makes no sense to describe something as a brilliant darkness: is it very bright, or very dark? It can't logically be both. Turner argues that such expressions deliberately juxtapose particular imagery which in literal terms is clearly paradoxical or untrue, in order to orient the reader to an unnameable principle. That principle is only beyond language when we take language to be framed only as the propositional or literal.

### THE POETIC TURN

An implication of the foregoing discussion is that educational speaking stands paradoxically between the particular and the universal. Without a full discussion or justification of this poetic relation, I turn to a quotation from Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* from 1595: "The philosopher [Sidney has in mind both philosophers of reason and of nature] therefore and the historian are they which would win the goal, the one by precept, the other by example; but both not having both, do both halt."<sup>25</sup> In other words, neither history's apprehension of facts nor philosophy's comprehension of principles are alone sufficient. We need a mediation between the precept and the example: something that gathers both. One might say that the vocation of the poet is to stand between the two, particulars and principles, bringing them into dialectical interplay:

for the poet he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth.  
For, as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to be true which is false.  
So as the other artists, and especially the historian, affirming  
many things, can, in the cloudy knowledge of mankind, hardly

escape from many lies ... [wise readers of poetry] will never give the lie to things not affirmatively but allegorically and figuratively written.<sup>26</sup>

Here poetic language does not concern truth and false things of reason or history, but employs the imaginal to speculatively make the world. This making recognises the role of poets to speak what is universal, but in temporal forms, which as Shakespeare has Theseus characterise it is to “give to airy nothing local habitation and a name.”<sup>27</sup> Poetic language entails a speech that exceeds itself, drawing the soul out of itself. It can speak of the beyond using the words of here and now. Drawing together the particular and universal, poets inhabit a liminal space which is pedagogically energising. If pedagogy concerns some orientation to the universal, the energy to realise the universal comes through the liminal mediations of particulars that reify. If the reifications of religious traditions allegorically figure the sacred and thereby make it something understood, it is because those reifications are pedagogically charged, not because they are “correct.”

Pedagogical reductions reify. But the teacher knows that they do not stop there. This reification is important, perhaps vital. The student can consider how to apply this to learning not only to their education, but also their edification. We teach concepts of social justice, democracy, and the good, having nothing more than imperfect historical examples. This does not mean we have no reference point for such concepts. Rather we turn to story, poetry, and myth. Hence Sidney argues that only fiction can really educate, because only fiction is true.<sup>28</sup>

Religious discourse, I suggest, reveals the structure of poetic language by constantly attempting to say the unsayable. Teaching is similarly speculative, for it entails the representation and therefore reduction of the world, a reduction that always lies. Perhaps this is a noble lie. The mystery seems to be that learning happens. For this involves seeing the universal through the particular, something no teacher can do for their student.

1 See Thomas Idinopulos and Edward Yonan, eds., *Religion and Reductionism: Essays on Eliade, Segal, and the Challenge of the Social Sciences for the Study of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

2 See Gavin Flood, "The importance of Religion 1: Religion and reductionism," *The Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies* (2008), <http://www.ochs.org.uk/lectures/importance-religion-1-religion-and-reductionism>.

3 Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Harper & Row, 1977).

4 Some nations such as the USA and France do not have any specific curriculum subject called religious education. Nevertheless, forms of religious studies exist. The conception of religious education employed here is primarily associated with a non-confessional relatively pluralistic one, though in principle the arguments could apply to confessional contexts as well. Indeed, this conception does not assume the classroom curriculum structures characteristic of many nations in Europe, but refers to a broad notion of religious education that might take place in the home, a place of worship, an educational institution, a museum, or elsewhere.

5 Jerome Bruner, "Art as a Mode of Knowing," in *On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand* (London: Belknap Press, 1997), 65.

6 Debates about the development of curriculum often entail some recognition of the process of reduction, though the German pedagogical tradition tends to have a more systematic and developed discussion about the nature of pedagogical reduction. Martin Buber has considered selection of the active world as vital component in education; see *Between Man and Man* (London: Routledge, 2002). Wolfgang Klafki has developed an influential Didaktik analysis which focuses on the exemplary: "Didaktik Analysis as the Core of Preparation of Instruction," in *Teaching as a Reflective Practice: The German Didaktik Tradition*, eds. Ian Westbury, Stefan Hopmann, and Kurt Riquarts (London: Routledge, 2015).

7 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 23f.

8 E.g. Michael Apple, *Official Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2014).

9 Klaus Mollenhauer, *Forgotten Connections: On Culture and Upbringing*, trans. Norm Friesen (London: Routledge, 2013).

10 Mollenhauer, *Forgotten Connections*, 46.

11 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 23f. See, for instance, "the inequality of achievement between the mature and the immature not only necessitates teaching the young, but the necessity of this teaching gives an immense stimulus to reducing experience to that order and form which will render it most easily communicable and hence most usable. ... [t]he first office of the social organ we call the school is to provide a simplified environment. It selects the features which are fairly fundamental and capable of being responded to by the young. Then it establishes a progressive order, using the factors first acquired as means of gaining insight into what is more complicated."

12 Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

13 For a discussion of the nature of the exemplary in education see Martin Wagen-schein, "Teaching to Understand: On the Concept of the Exemplary in Teaching," in

- Teaching as a Reflective Practice: The German Didaktik Tradition*, eds. Ian Westbury, Stefan Hopmann, and Kurt Riquarts (London: Routledge, 2015).
- 14 E.g. Michael Apple, *Official Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2014).
- 15 Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. M. Heath (Penguin: London, 1996), Chapter 9.
- 16 See James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (Mineola, NY: Dover Books, 2003).
- 17 Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- 18 See “Hinduism not a religion but a way of life, says Modi,” *The Hindu*, April 17, 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/hinduism-not-a-religion-but-a-way-of-life-modi/article7112383.ece>
- 19 See Shaun Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and Education* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992).
- 20 Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: Third Edition* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2012).
- 21 See Meister Eckhart, “On Detachment,” in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, eds. and trans. Edward Colledge and Bernard McGinn (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981).
- 22 Dionysius the Areopagite, *Dionysius the Areopagite: The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, trans. C. E. Rolt (London: Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, 1920).
- 23 See Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
- 24 Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Chapter 2.
- 25 Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed., Albert Cook (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1890), 15.
- 26 Sidney, *Apology*, 35-6.
- 27 William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act V, Scene I.
- 28 Sidney, *Apology*, 40.