**Edge Hill Religious Education Summer School 2022**

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Intellectual Humility & Religious Education

# Why Intellectual humility?

I chose to investigate intellectual humility primarily because of concern about the current state of public political and social discourse and the influence this has on our children. Additionally, there has been a renewed interest in intellectual humility in the fields of philosophy and psychology, and it is a term I have heard recently from a number of academics in the RE world. For example, when discussing the concept of personal knowledge in RE, Trevor Cooling (2022) said: ‘[it] should be the product of informed judgement and it values the virtue of intellectual humility’. I also had in mind a recent conversation with a Year 11 student. We were learning about debating as part of non-examined KS4 RE. She asked me why debating was so adversarial and pointed to the language we use: opponent, defeat, rebuttal etc. This developed into a whole-class discussion about gender, social class and politics. It got me thinking: does my classroom encourage intellectual humility and should it?

I used the opportunity given to me by Edge Hill University to research, discuss and think more deeply about intellectual humility and the role it might play in RE. Below are some of the things I learnt and thought about.

# What is intellectual humility?

A fantastic introduction to the concept is a short film called *The Joy of Being Wrong* produced by the John Templeton Foundation. Church & Samuelson (2017) devote a chapter to defining it in their book *Intellectual Humility*. They argue for a doxastic view of intellectual humility, meaning that we should view it as a virtuous mean where the individual neither overly values their beliefs (intellectual arrogance), nor undervalues them (intellectual diffidence): ‘[i]nstead, she values her beliefs, their epistemic status, and her intellectual abilities as she ought’ (Church & Samuelson, 2017, page 7).

Cognitive science provides some challenging theories about how the mind works and how we learn. It appears to be much less straightforward than we might have thought. We have biases, often hold contradictory beliefs and we have blind spots. An example is the Dunning-Kruger effect, a claimed cognitive bias where the least knowledgeable are more likely to overestimate their knowledge and ability. Intellectual humility assumes that we are prone to getting it wrong and encourages us to challenge these inbuilt faults in our thinking.

Discussion about the origins of the concept of intellectual humility includes many of the great names in our subject. Socrates’ refusal to make any claims to knowledge, Aristotle’s virtue theory and Decartes’ extreme scepticism can all be seen as forms of intellectual humility. St Paul talked about how we see through a mirror dimly (1 Corinthians 13:12) and St Augustine viewed humility as the foundation of all other virtues. Wittgenstein famously said that nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself. It seems there is a rich vein of intellectual humility running through the disciplines associated with RE (although one might question the extent to which the virtue was always practised by those named).

Volf (cited by Hook & Davis, 2018, page 222) talks about intellectual humility as a process of developing ‘binocular vision’ by moving back and forth between one’s own perspective and that of another: ‘intellectually humble people deeply value ongoing conversations with people holding different convictions, because this is the only way to challenge one’s own blind spots’. There are many connections here with approaches used in RE: Worldviews, Critical Religious Education and Philosophy for Children (P4C) to name a few.

# Characteristics of an intellectually humble person

There are many possible characteristics to consider, but in general, the intellectually humble person is able to regulate their concern for being right and is open to new information and pursuing and incorporating knowledge and truth from other sources, even when it is discrepant from one’s original position (Hook & Davis, 2018, page 220)

They tend to display the following:

* a willingness to reconsider
* are not defensive when challenged
* strive for accuracy
* a realistic outlook
* less self-important
* correct natural tendency to prioritise their own needs
* ‘bend-but-not-break’ analogy (Hook & Davis, 2018, page 222); the palm tree might bend almost horizontal in a hurricane and never stand quite the same again, but it almost never breaks

# Role models

I asked people who they thought was intellectuality humble and here are some of the names I was given. It is not clear what they have in common and people struggled to elaborate. I did notice, however, that many come from scientific and journalistic backgrounds. Indeed, some of the literature I encountered made links between the scientific method and intellectual humility. This is interesting for us to consider in RE, given that religion and science are often seen as being in opposition.

* Brian Cox
* Mary Beard
* Jon Ronson
* Louis Theroux
* Robert Beckford
* Natalie Haynes
* David Olusoga
* David Attenborough
* Brian May
* Rory Stewart
* Al Murray
* Dan Snow

I wonder too, who might be seen as representing the alternative dispositions of intellectual diffidence or arrogance? I have a suspicion that RE teachers are drawn to those who are outspoken and overly confident, in the interests of engaging our students. One of my colleagues at the summer school, Dawn Cox, coined the phrase ‘shock-jock RE’, something I think I have been guilty of. It raises questions for us about which voices we choose to represent in our classrooms and what this models for our children.

# Possible benefits of Intellectual Humility

Research in this area is tentative, but there are claims that intellectual humility may help well-being as it cultivates a reality-grounded view of oneself within one’s culture/ tradition that balances the good and bad (Hook & Davies). It allows us to acknowledge that we cannot have a complete understanding and to be mindful of our blind-spots, encouraging us to address them. It seems likely that being intellectually humble encourages dialogue, collaboration and reflection, all of which could have significant personal and societal benefits. From an RE teacher’s perspective, it could be a powerful tool to improve learning about and dealing with the controversy and disagreement inherent in our subject.

# Dangers of intellectual humility

Intellectual humility is not without problems. Hook & Davis (2018, page 221) warn ‘it may be costly psychologically, socially and spiritually’. From a psychological perspective, concerns have been expressed about the extreme anxiety that might result from the realisation that we know so little. From a philosophical viewpoint, it leads us to questions about relativism and truth claims. Does intellectual humility mean we must all accept other perspectives, even when they appear to be wrong? How does intellectual humility relate to any ultimate reality? Does it require us to give up on ever knowing? What does it mean for those of us who come from communities where there are very strong claims to truth that an intellectually humble disposition would require us to question? Hook & Davis (2018, page 220) use another analogy, this time with the game of Jenga, where belief for many is ‘like a load-bearing block’ which, if moved, may cause a complete collapse. How can we handle this in the classroom?

# Questions to consider for RE

All of this has raised further questions. Here are a few of them:

1. Do we want to encourage intellectual humility in the RE classroom? On the whole, my initial thinking is yes, we do and that a conscious consideration of the concept will help us to move closer to achieving it.
2. How do we teachers model intellectual humility?
3. What examples and role models are we presenting in the classroom and how do they encourage/discourage intellectual humility?
4. What is the role of experts and academics?
5. What dispositions do our use of language and choice of activity in the classroom foster?
6. How do our assessments foster/inhibit intellectual humility?
7. What can we do to minimise potential barriers to intellectual humility? e.g. creating a safe and secure environment where status is not challenged? Can cognitive science help us?
8. What is the relationship between intellectual humility and religious belief?
9. What is the connection between intellectual humility, science and religion?
10. How do we encourage a ‘binocular perspective’ (Volf)? Worldviews/ lenses/ dialogue/ reflexivity/ oracy/ P4C?
11. Should we teach intellectual humility explicitly? Can it be learnt?
12. Can we/should we measure intellectual humility?

# Next steps

I intend to continue to read, talk and think about intellectual humility. There is a lot of research from a range of fields that could help develop our thinking on this. I hope to see the concept of intellectual humility continue to be present in discussions about the future of Religious Education and I would love to undertake some classroom-based research to test some of these ideas.

# References

Church, I M & Samuelson, P L (2017*) Intellectual Humility. An Introduction to the Philosophy and Science*

Cooling, T (2022) *Strictly RE* Keynote 1

Hook, J N & Davis, D E (2018) in ‘Intellectual Humility and religious Belief; Part 1a: Intellectual Humility and Religion: A psychological Perspective’, Journal of Psychology and Theology, Vol 46(4) 219-242

John Templeton Foundation: <https://www.templeton.org/project/intellectual-humility>