The interpretive approach was developed originally for use in religious education in publicly funded community schools in England and Wales, where the subject is primarily concerned with helping pupils to gain a critical and reflective understanding of religions. Subsequently, the approach has been developed further in the UK, and has also been used in Norway, Germany, Canada and Japan as well as in a Council of Europe project on bringing the dimension of religious diversity to intercultural education across its 47 member states (Council of Europe 2004; Keast 2007). The approach provides theoretical stimulus for research and pedagogy being conducted as part of a European Commission Framework 6 project (REDCo) on religious education by a consortium of ten European universities (Weisse 2007). Thus the approach continues to be used and developed in a variety of contexts. It is not intended as a replacement or substitute for other approaches, and I have always emphasised that the interpretive approach is not advanced as the approach to the subject, but as a contribution to theoretical, methodological and pedagogical debates (e.g. Jackson 1997, 6) and as complementary to some other approaches (Jackson 2004; 2006b).

At the time of writing, it is ten years since the publication of Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach (Jackson 1997), the first text to give a detailed articulation of the interpretive approach to the study of religious diversity in schools. The ideas have been applied since then in a number of contexts and, as indicated above, are being developed currently in various ways. Thus, it seems an appropriate point to reflect on the emergence and development of the approach so far.

It gives me particular pleasure to conduct this discussion as a contribution to the Festschrift for H.-G. Heimbrock. Heimbrock has been instrumental in fostering dialogue between European religious educators with different theoretical and pedagogical perspectives through the auspices of the European Network for Religious Education through Contextual Approaches (ENRECA) (e.g. Heimbrock, Scheilke & Schreiner 2001). My own work has benefited very greatly from the supportive
and collegial atmosphere of ENRECA, and specifically from the positive, engaging and constructively critical feedback offered by Heimbrock personally over many years.

The emergence of the interpretive approach

The experience of engaging in ethnographic field studies of a way of life very different from my own (initially ‘Hinduism’ in an English city) changed my views about theory and method in qualitative research in religion, and in publicly funded religious education provided for a diverse population. The book *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach* (Jackson 1997) summarised ideas developed from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s during several research studies of children from different religious and ethnic backgrounds in Britain and applied them to issues concerning religious education in schools. Studies specifically of children from a Hindu background, together with some of the theory contributing to the interpretive approach, had already influenced the structure and contents of *Approaches to Hinduism* (Jackson & Killingley 1988) and two books for children which drew on the research material (Jackson 1989a; Jackson & Nesbitt 1990); the methodologies of these texts are discussed in Jackson 1989b. A detailed report on the research on Hindu children was published in 1993, including material discussing the concept of ‘Hinduism’ and various methodological issues (Jackson & Nesbitt 1993).

Participation in ethnographic fieldwork led to questioning the theoretical position of the phenomenology of religion (as articulated by its ‘classical’ exponents), its practical usefulness as a research tool, and its efficacy as a method and approach for religious education (Jackson 1997, 7–29). The more philosophical versions of the phenomenology of religion had posited universal ideal types or ‘essences’, embedded in human consciousness and known subjectively through intuition (e.g. van der Leeuw 1938). Although expressed in different cultural and historical contexts, the ‘essence’ of religion was regarded as universal, and its various ‘ideal types’—seen almost as Platonic forms or ideas—were given expression through particular examples. Thus, although found in different cultural or historical situations, the meaning of these essences was held to be constant, and could be uncovered through the processes of suspending one’s own presuppositions and empathising with the ‘other’, whether through engaging with a text or an example of living religion.