THE REPRESENTATION OF RELIGION IN EDUCATION: 
A CRITIQUE OF JOHN HULL’S INTERPRETATION OF 
RELIGIONISM AND RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE 

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Abstract
This essay evaluates the recent, important response of Professor John M. Hull, of the University of Birmingham, to the question of what schools should do to foster harmonious relations between the disparate religious and non-religious groupings that constitute the population in most of our liberal, democratic Western nations. In a series of influential articles, Hull has articulated both an interpretation of the nature of religious intolerance and a proposed strategy for challenging intolerance in schools. In this paper Hull’s position is carefully set out and then critically assessed. In the light of weaknesses in his account, a different understanding of the nature of religious intolerance is pursued along with a brief outline of a different educational strategy for responding to religious and cultural differences in schools.

Keywords:
Religionism, religious intolerance, prejudice, pluralism, religious education

1. INTRODUCTION

In a recent article in the Journal of the American Academy of Religion, entitled ‘One God, One Revelation, One People: On the Symbolic Structure of Elective Monotheism’, Professor Martin S. Jaffee (2001) has drawn attention to the way in which, what he calls elective monotheistic religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, provide a remarkably fertile symbolic universe for legitimating violence and for fostering inter-communal rivalry and conflict. In his view the symbolic foundations of these three religions, with their respective claims to revelation from a single creator God who chooses particular individuals and communities through which to effect his purposes for humankind, create a situation that not only pits religious adherents against non-adherents but also pits religious adherents against each other as one ‘elected’ community challenges the religious legitimacy of other communities. ‘On the plane of history’, Jaffee concludes, ‘the capacity of [the] God [of the different versions of elective monotheism] to love intensely and exclusively is translated, as often as not, into the human capacity to hate intensely’ (Jaffee, 2001,
p. 774). For him, competition and conflict among monotheistic traditions are not a failure of monotheistic ethics but an expression of the fundamental intentionality of monotheistic discourses as symbolic systems.

Jaffee’s conclusion is no doubt controversial, and at the very least tendentious. For example, there is no discussion or even mention of the beneficial effects of elective (ethical) monotheism for individuals and for societies, and these it could be contended are considerable (for a balanced approach, see Stark, 2001; also Stark & Bainbridge, 1996). There is also the issue of whether he is entirely fair to the symbolic structures of these three great religions. His construction of each in terms of an electing God who discloses himself to a recipient community that carries and embodies God’s message through history to a cataclysmic resolution, while accurate, as far as it goes, nevertheless fails to capture the specificity of the different symbolic systems; and it is the specificities of doctrine and symbol within each religion that provide the context for the proper interpretation of the common constructions. Within the symbolic world of Christianity the doctrine of an electing God has to be interpreted alongside belief in God’s gracious character whereby he enters human history in the person of his Son and suffers and dies for humankind’s salvation. Similarly, the doctrine of a chosen historical community in Christianity has to be interpreted alongside the belief that this community is called to sacrificial service for humankind. The triumph of the Crucified and his community is eschatological, not historical (Moltmann, 1977). Hatred towards those with whom one disagrees is not an attitude that finds endorsement within the Christian Scriptures, indeed quite the contrary (Matthew 5:38-48; see Hays, 1996, pp. 313-346, and Schrage, 1988, pp. 73-79). Of course Jaffee might retort that history records numerous instances of Christian hatred towards ‘non-believers’. Who could deny this? The crucial issue is whether such behaviour is warranted by the symbolic discourse of Christian belief or whether it results from the negative aspects of human nature, say the human propensity to self-centredness and pride; what Kant would have subsumed under the category of ‘radical evil’ (Kant, 1998 [1794], pp. 55-61). Had Jaffee attended to a symbolically rich description of Christian theism rather than a symbolically poor description of elective theism that confines itself to a narrow range of common theistic beliefs, then a different interpretation of Christianity could have resulted. (Perhaps something similar could be said with regard to Judaism and Islam as well, I am not qualified to judge.)

Despite these misgivings, Jaffee has undoubtedly drawn our attention to an important issue, that of religious bigotry and intolerance and the