Challenging Religious Education in a Multicultural World
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Abstract.

This paper both challenges religious education in the UK to embrace issues of value, equality and anti-racism, and also encourages teachers and schools to ensure that religious education is challenging to pupils. It demonstrates the importance of focusing teacher training more on *how* the subject is taught and less on content, seeing religious education as a process rather than a body of knowledge. It asserts the importance of open dialogue and respect, to produce religious education which edifies pupils from all faiths as well as those with no religious allegiance.

The task of preparing pupils and students to live and work with high levels of inter-cultural awareness and understanding has serious implications for Religious Education (R.E.). The British population is ethnically diverse; world news makes far off places feel local; there is a sense of concerned world action in the face of disaster or conflict. News from Bosnia and elsewhere constantly reminds us of what could happen if we fail. This article will examine current policy and practice in religious education in the light of multicultural perspectives to determine how R.E. might contribute to the development of inter-faith and inter-cultural understanding.

Dr. Nick Tate of the Schools Curriculum & Assessment Authority (SCAA) claimed in July [1995] that education, including R.E., should focus on "traditional British culture" so children should know what it means to be British. This might imply that priority be given to institutional Christianity and Christian teachings. This view has a long history and influenced the parliamentary debate in 1987-88 which gave Christianity an "embarrassing prominence" (Hull 1989: 119). It is also a clarion call of the New Educational Right (cf. Gordon, 1989). But what is traditional British culture? No national consensus is either available or possible. The Swann Report maintained, under the heading 'Diversity within Unity': "To seek to represent 'being British' as something long established and immutable fails to acknowledge that the concept is in fact dynamic and ever changing, adapting and absorbing new ideas and influences" (DES 1985: 7). In a sense, British culture is about tolerance, religious freedom and virtues which, although popularly viewed as Christian, are in fact common to each world religion. Fossilising a particular model of British culture is defensive, seeking to protect "Englishness" from "alien" influences and customs; and it is to some degree exclusivist and assimilationist, claiming that British is best and "aliens" can join the club only by giving up their alien ways and becoming British. It is also nostalgic rather than forward looking, an attempt to recapture a mythical Britishness rather than developing a British identity for today and the future, in all its multi-ethnic reality. Troyna and Carrington (1990, 12-27) analyse what they call this "impoverished conception of the national culture" as examples of assimilationist pressures.

Assimilation produces policies which take no account of minorities; the majority view defines what will become the common standard. In contrast, concern for freedom of religion reduces pressures for a confessional R.E.

curriculum in most cases. The 1988 Education Reform Act may be the first piece of legislation in R.E. to specify that Christianity should be taught; but it also stipulates that the principal faiths in Britain other than Christianity should be given their place. The Act is not itself assimilationist but recognises cultural diversity and pluralism. In R.E. if not in school worship, it requires teaching rather than preaching, in maintained state schools at least, requiring that teaching is not distinctive of any particular religious denomination. And the SCAA guidelines (1994) have allowed faith communities to stipulate how their faith is presented.

Religious education is a traditional component of the school curriculum in Britain; its future seems currently to be assured. The aims are generally defined in terms of learning about religion in general and religions in particular; and developing personally in the light of the ideas and issues explored (what the Model Syllabuses call "learning from religion"). One purpose may therefore be the acquisition of a body of knowledge about religious traditions and practices which involves the understanding of terminology and ideas. Another may be better defined in terms of skills and attitudes, involving curiosity about and respect for religious faiths and traditions, skills in dialogue, engagement in the processes of thinking through problems and issues, and the ability to synthesise to develop personal views. Some aims are more problematic - for R.E. to make pupils "better", more caring, moral, self"-disciplined. well behaved. This is an ideal of education generally; but an R.E. which tells pupils what to do and how to think on the basis of religious teachings is unlikely to be effective and is running perilously close to indoctrination and is unlikely to be successful. Using R.E. to make pupils more moral is however politically attractive: the Singapore government for example pressed for the reintroduction of Chinese (Confucian) religious values into the curriculum to help pupils become more concerned for the common good (Tamney 1988, 1993).

Another difficult term is "commitment": pupils and teachers come into R.E. with various forms and levels of commitment and each in their own way should find the experience edifying; and pupils may, as a general form of intellectual enthusiasm, become committed to the study of religion; but the purpose of R.E. is not to create particular commitment to a specified faith tradition. In contrast, "Christian education" or "Islamic education" in places of worship and even religious schools may incorporate nurture with education and thereby seek to deepen specific faith commitment.

R.E. can take some credit for being among the early advocates of multicultural education. The 1971 Schools Council Working Paper 36, *Religious education in the secondary school* was written at a time when agreed syllabuses for R.E. still promoted Christian education. Stemming from the new department of religious studies at Lancaster University, it saw R.E. primarily as a study of religion and outlined an appropriate methodology: accurate in-depth study of contemporary manifestations of religion that is sympathetic, fair, balanced and respectful. This has become known as the phenomenological method as it stemmed from Edmund Husserl's philosophical phenomenology (Bowker, 1995: xiii-xx, 158-180). Working Paper 36 influenced secondary R.E. in state and Church of England schools (for Roman Catholic schools *Weaving the Web* came much later). The primary school version came with Working Paper 44 (Schools Council, 1972) , followed in 1977 by a curriculum planning series of books called *Discovering an Approach*. There was here a greater emphasis on developing ideas and concepts, both alongside and through explicit information about religion: dubbed "implicit religious education" this became a major plank in the construction of primary school syllabuses. Three titles from *Discovering an Approach* illustrate this well: *Discovering Meaning* (about the religious

quest); *Conveying Meaning* (about forms of communication); *Celebrating Meaning* (about festivals and religious practice). Enthusiasm for implicit R.E. in the 1970s was to some extent a symptom of anxiety about insufficient expertise in world faiths on the one hand, and the need to avoid Christian indoctrination on the other.

The first fully multi-faith and phenomenological local agreed syllabus came in 1975 (the City of Birmingham) followed in 1978 by Hampshire, a syllabus which proved influential in shire counties. Many authorities over the next decade produced or adopted new syllabuses which incorporated multi-faith approaches.

R.E. AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Multicultural awareness and approaches were also being developed in parallel. Schools Council documents were particularly influential (Little and Willey 1981; Willey 1982; Klein 1982). Concerns were being expressed about ethnic minority underachievement and teacher expectation, about harassment and bullying, and the Anglocentric or Eurocentric focus of the curriculum. Under-achievement became the focus of a "Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups" headed by Anthony Rampton which made an interim report in 1981 identifying racism as a major factor (DES 1981; cf. Klein 1993: 59f). Multicultural education was advocated for all schools. Education should not, it argued "seek to iron out the differences between cultures, nor attempt to draw everyone into the dominant culture": it should "draw upon the experiences of the many cultures that make up our society and thus broaden the cultural horizons of every child".

Concern over harassment led to anti-racist movements and policies which sought to challenge unintentional as well as intentional racism: the All London Teachers against Racism and Fascism (ALTARF) formed in 1978 was an influential example (see Troyna and Carrington, 1990: 31 f). The issue of the curriculum was not only one of whether it was relevant to ethnic minority children or helpful in informing white pupils about multicultural issues: there were major concerns over whether the overall model of the curriculum perpetuated outdated notions of British, European and white supremacy. Kenneth Baker said, for example at the 1988 Conservative Party conference that he was not "ashamed of what we (British) have done. Britain has given many great things to the world. That's been our civilising mission"; we may prefer, with the historian Christopher Hill, to see history as helping us "come to grips with the horrors of our past" (Guardian 29 May 1989:9). It is hard not to be ashamed, for example. of the Amritsar massacre in 1919 (Draper, 1985). Both the place and status of Christianity in R.E. today have been key issues, ensuring that Christianity is not marginalised. However, is Christianity one religion among many? or is it the main religion to be taught, in the light of which all other faiths are compared?

The 1980s saw a shift within multicultural education, with contrasting emphases emerging. In educational circles, assimilationist philosophies which marginalised ethnic backgrounds had been replaced by strategies encouraging integration or celebrating cultural pluralism (Mullard 1982). Assimilation - becoming "British" - is clearly attractive to the dominant group but gives no guarantee that even the fully assimilated will be accepted. It implies a total sacrifice of culture, language and identity. The Department of Education and Science, as early as the Bullock Report, was firmly opposed to this:

"No child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold, nor to live and act as though school and home represent two totally separate and different cultures

which have to be kept firmly apart. The curriculum should reflect many elements of that part of his life which a child lives outside school" (DES, 1975: 286).

Integration may aim towards a harmonious society, but we have to recognise the reality of racial hostility, the desire to maintain identity and culture, and the value of mother-tongue provision for children's learning (Klein 1993, 51-5), Cultural pluralism admitted and acknowledged the reality of diversity, and even celebrated it in the curriculum; but it did not tackle the underlying prejudice, discrimination and racism in school and in society. In consequence "celebrations of cultural diversity did nothing to enhance the educational performance of ethnic minority pupils" (Klein, 1993, 68).

An alternative model, anti-racist education (ARE), emerged which focused on changing white attitudes. Much multicultural or multiracial teaching was perceived as a form of tokenistic social control, and as racist in intention or effect in that it maintained the status quo of white dominance (see in particular M Stone 1981). Nevertheless,

"multicultural education cannot be so easily dismissed, nor can anti-racist education be seen as the panacea for the ills of racism... teaching about the contributions of diverse cultures to the body of knowledge... broadens the horizons of all and undermines racist misconceptions. Wherever multicultural education fails to embrace an antiracist perspective, however, it invites criticism as tokenist ... as not addressing the fundamental issues of equality of power" (Klein, 1993, 65f).

In fact a balance between tackling (institutional) racism and celebrating diversity can be found in early theoretical analysis (cf Banks 1973; 1986); both are important, the first for raising achievement and equalising opportunity, the latter for developing understanding across cultures. "The inspiring principle of multi-cultural education then is to sensitise the child to the inherent plurality of the world - the plurality of systems, belief, ways of life, cultures, modes of analysing familiar experiences, ways of looking at historical events and so on" (Parekh, 1986, 27). It "is not about exotica but about all the people in a plural society and about the interdependent nature of the world" (Modgil et al. 1986: 16). Instead of trivialisation, it should begin "to address the problems of racism, and the need to educate all ethnic groups (including whites) for inter-cultural living in a non-exploitative world" (Bagley, 1986: 54).

In R.E., syllabuses had a core of Christianity and varied on how much was included about other faith traditions (depending largely on the ethnic mix of the local authority). They attempted to weaken prejudice by enabling pupils to be better informed about the range of religious faiths. There are however many problems to this view. *What* is taught is less significant than *how* it is taught: for example, including Islam in the syllabus could increase prejudice if it is taught conflictually and without respect. Attitudes are more significant than content. The assumption that racism is a form of prejudice caused by ignorance is also suspect. An informed racist may discover a great deal to use as ammunition, but the central issue of respect will not have been tackled. If R.E. is about reducing prejudice or racism, indirect strategies are unlikely to be satisfactory: more direct approaches are needed. Cultural pluralism explored black lifestyles: "This belief in the causal relationship between the promotion of lifestyles and the enhancement of life-chances for black pupils was seductive, enduring and non-threatening" (Troyna and Carrington, 1990, 20). It did not however address issues of racism and was superficial: Troyna (Troyna and Williams 1986:24) caricatured it as The Three S's approach: Saris, Samosas and Steel-bands, - interesting but fundamentally unchallenging. R.E.'s equivalent might be

Founders, Festivals and Faiths: each are not in themselves unimportant; but they can be used superficially and tokenistically by poor teachers.

R.E. needs to reflect the fact that some ethnic minority children and their families are living and learning 'in terror' (Council for Racial Equality 1987a, 1987b). We have to do more than help minorities to feel included; indeed inaccurate misunderstanding can add to their feeling of isolation and alienation. Anti-racist education sought to challenge attitudes about race. It gave serious consideration to black perspectives: the presence of ethnic minority children in schools is not a "problem" that white officials need to solve but provides situations and opportunities that full consultation and partnership can enrich and find enriching. It takes seriously the black experience of racist harassment, violence, insecurity and official indifference, seeking to identify and change structural and institutional barriers to racial equity. Anti-racist education therefore is political rather than descriptive, a running-mate of equal opportunities and human rights education. R.E. also cannot avoid politics.

The Swann Report in 1985 made the final observations and recommendations of The Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups. This major report has been much discussed and, despite putting multicultural education on the political map, criticised by the anti-racist movement. They felt that it did not properly recognise institutional racism, and it subscribed to the view of racism as individual prejudice rather than providing an agenda towards equality (Klein, 1993, 67f; Troyna and Carrington 1990, 76-80). R.E. is treated // in detail, as a curriculum response to racism:

> "Bringing about a greater understanding of the diversity of faiths pre-sent in Britain today can also therefore we believe play a major role in challenging and overcoming racism" (DES, 1985, 466).

The Report firmly favoured the phenomenological approach to the study of religions outlined in Schools Council Working Paper 36 as

> "the only means of enhancing the understanding of all pupils, from whatever religious background, of the plurality of faiths in contemporary Britain, of bringing them to an understanding of the nature of belief and the religious dimension of human existence, and of helping them to appreciate the diverse and sometimes conflicting life stances which exist and thus enabling them to determine (and justify) their own religious position." (p.474).

It concluded (p.496):

> "We believe that religious education can playa central role in preparing all pupils for life in today's multiracial Britain, and can also lead them to a greater understanding of the diversity of the global community. We feel that religious education of the kind which we have discussed here can also contribute towards challenging and countering the influence of racism in our society."

However, an observation made of research in all-white schools is telling: "in those schools where overt racial views were already present, such initiatives (for example teaching world faiths) were seen as of little value in altering attitudes" (p.234). It went on to comment that separate "race and prejudice" sessions were "viewed with open hostility by parents, pupils and some staff members". The Swann Report' s solution was clearly not that simple. Far from reducing racism, its solutions provided ammunition for racists and offered an agenda for opposition. The root of the problem lies, in contrast, not in information but in attitudes. Since this information model recommended by the Swann Report conceptually underpins the SCAA model syllabuses, the problem is a persistent one.

ERA (1988) **AND BEYOND**

The Education Reform Act (1988) highlighted spiritual and moral aspects of the whole curriculum and retained R.E. as a subject of the "basic curriculum". It is not a National Curriculum subject so parents retain the right to withdraw children on grounds of conscience. R.E. is required to reflect both Christianity and the other major religious traditions found in Britain. There had been no legal definition of the nature of R.E. in the 1944 Education Act; this 1988 legal definition is incontrovertibly multi-faith. The act of worship, on the other hand, should be wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character (although in state schools worship should not be distinctive of any particular denomination). If this arrangement is not appropriate for a particular school, the local standing advisory council for religious education (SACRE) can determine that a more appropriate model of worship is allowed.

No national working party was set up to define the content of R.E., although SCAA in 1994 published guidelines for constructing agreed syllabuses with a world religions/ phenomenological focus. These guidelines are, usefully, based on working groups of members of the six chosen faith groups. Less usefully, they assume that // religious education and religious studies are identical and effectively limit the suggested syllabuses to the academic study of contemporary religions. A sop to personal evaluation, the attainment target "learning from religion is undeveloped and might suggest that pupils reach their own views about what they are learning (the evaluation element of GCSE). There is a real danger in religious studies of jumping to premature conclusions after superficial study (Bigger 1989: 4). It is indeed possible that faith members writing about their own faiths in examinations might be marked down because these do not coincide with the stereotyped views of faith traditions given in textbooks. A body of R.E. knowledge may contain inaccurate and unjustifiable stereotypes. There are implications here for examiners as well as teachers.

The R.E. scene after ERA has been obsessed with content. How much Christianity will there be? What exactly should children learn about religions? What should the balance be between the different bodies of knowledge? In a sense this is a blind alley. How pupils learn to integrate their understanding, feelings, attitudes and values should be far more central. What pupils do with knowledge about religions is more crucial to the way they construct their view of the world, relationships and loyalties.

CHALLENGING AIMS FOR R.E.

R.E. encourages pupils to be *religiate*, to use Cox's term (Cox, 1983). This implies familiarity with the history, teaching, ideas and terminology of religions; and a degree of embedding of this information into the lifestances that pupils are beginning to develop (what the SCAA Model Syllabuses call "learning from religion". Successful R.E. depends less on written syllabuses than on the professional expertise of teachers. R.E. requires sensitive and religiate teachers, whether specialists or non-specialists, in both primary and secondary schools: these require accurate knowledge and sympathetic understanding:

> "To be able to become intimate with many kinds of people who are very different is a great accomplishment. This should be the goal of good education, and is the essential step forward to a pluralist society" (Triandis 1986: 91).

There is a real question about whether R.E. has an appropriately definable body of knowledge. A consensus might not be difficult, incorporating aspects of the history and contemporary practices and beliefs of specified religions, and including ethical and philosophical issues. We are left with the key issue of whether individual teachers, usually white and Christian, can know enough about religions to teach meaningfully. It is a

"quite staggering" assumption that "such a gargantuan task" is even possible and allowable (Cole, 1986: 124). The attempt can lead "at best to meaningless platitudes, at worst to racist stereotypes". Simplistic analyses of religions can fuel prejudice by misinformation. Racist stereotypes are abundant in the media: teachers need to enable pupils to recognise them for what they are. R.E. looks beyond knowledge to help to develop approaches to understanding. Knowledge needs not only to be relevant, but its significance needs to be understood.

R.E. should prepare pupils for living in a multicultural and multi-faith world so how R.E. is learnt is important. Learning in R.E. should imply interaction with the range // of faiths being studied, an educational interaction which is based on openness, respect and curiosity. It should be able to ask real questions and not be satisfied by shallow analysis. In a sense, what R.E. is seeking to achieve can be defined through skills in religious interaction and dialogue, and the ability to analyse information. In the information-rich world of today and tomorrow, handling information is more important than remembering 'knowledge'. This will still require understanding of the broad religious field to know how new information might relate to it; but it places much greater emphasis on processes of understanding and analysis which will enable pupils in future to explore religions which are new to them.

The success of dialogue depends totally on the attitudes of the people involved. A dismissive attitude and a closed mind will allow no learning. Dialogue assumes listening and hearing, as we strive to find meaning in the thoughts and views of people from radically different traditions. Dialogue contains an element of risk: our views may be challenged and invite us to reconsider our own so consequently our reaction might be defensive rather than open. However, the process is potentially helpful as we and our pupils learn to deal sensitively with inter-personal issues and inter-cultural conflict, within ourselves as well as amongst others.

Visits are sometimes used to make study more relevant to students; but it is not inevitable that these are educationally successful. Without careful preparation and handling, visits can increase prejudice and reinforce racism, not reduce them, This makes sharp demands on the teacher's professional expertise. Propinquity and contact need not by itself reduce prejudice and might increase it: "merely to put people together in a room, without creating conditions of interdependence, superordinate goals and superordinate normative regulators and associated sanctions for their implementation...has little effect and can be counterproductive (Triandis, 1986: 89). How to approach a visit, with what aims and rules, may be more significant than remembering information about the faith being visited. How pupils think about others and behave towards other faiths and cultures should be centrally part of R.E..

Evaluation took on a key meaning in R.E. after the GCSE National Criteria of 1985, highlighting knowledge, understanding and evaluation. Candidates should "express an opinion of their own" (3.3) - the process of evaluation should be assessed, "based on the use of evidence and argument at a simple lever', not the validity or otherwise of the opinions they express. Parekh (1986: 28) makes the point well that we should approach evaluation very cautiously, ensuring first that we should carefully and accurately describe and elucidate another's culture, faith or moral system. "It is only when this is done that evaluation of it has a meaning". The level of analysis possible in school scarcely begins to provide a foundation for secure evaluation and should perhaps content itself with exploring the dangers of premature judgements. Furthermore "evaluating another society in terms of the norms of one's own inevitably leads to distortion and is intellectually illegitimate. Instead, a teacher should encourage his pupils to set up a

dialogue between their // own and another society, exploring each in terms of the other, asking questions about another society that arise from their own and asking questions about the latter that someone from another society would wish to ask." (Parekh, ibid.). Superficiality about religion is a great danger for R.E. Pupils do not have the depth of understanding to judge other faiths, cultures or beliefs. Their own developing opinions on issues and beliefs should be expressed non-judgementally, with full and explicit regard for the need for opinions to be informed. It is not true to say that one opinion is as good as the next: different opinions need to be tested and weighed. The start of this process is to discover and evaluate our own assumptions and prejudices. The implications of this for GCSE examiners is precise and clear; and it is pertinent to all teachers as they encourage pupils to think for themselves. Evaluation is, in effect, the opposite of forming or expressing superficial and premature opinions.

One major criticism of multi-faith teaching has been that it confuses pupils in that there is too much information for them to absorb. My own research with 8-9 year old pupils (Bigger, 1987) found this argument less than persuasive where teaching is clear and appropriate. It is nevertheless true that R.E. teaching will be confusing if the teacher is confused, again laying stress on the importance of providing opportunities for teacher education. World religions is not a major strength of many teachers, even of R.E. specialists, and this can cause anxiety. Confused teaching in any subject is a problem; confusion in R.E. can have racist effects (but not necessarily intentions!) if it impairs understanding and positive attitudes.

Another charge has been that of relativism: that multifaith R.E. preaches that there are many paths to God, that each are equally good and equally applicable. This complaint is more naturally associated with faiths - or rather people within faiths - who feel that their path is the only right one, and that children should be taught what is right and what is wrong. The Christian Right have strongly lobbied this point of view, especially since 1988, and the popular press feel that this sells copies. Inter-faith dialogue at an adult level can be similarly vitiated by exclusivist tendencies, the conviction that 'we' are right and 'they' are wrong. R.E. has to recognise that each faith has its own truth claims and its own world view and be careful to do justice to each.

A caricature of this accusation has become a powerful metaphor to condemn multi-faith R.E.: the supermarket approach. The R.E. teacher is said to be describing the available religions from which youngsters select one which suits them "off the shelf' or "off the peg". The most important counter argument is that R.E., as a form of education, is not about conversion to any faith. It should encourage personal choice in the sense that pupils should be constantly weighing up what they are learning in the light of their personal experience, viewing issues from various perspectives and coming to informed conclusions. Remembering our point about premature judgements, these conclusions will be constantly under review. Second, it is most unlikely that pupils will select a faith on the basis of R.E. teaching because that is not how commitment tends to work. Few move away from // the faith commitment they were born into to another. Many drift away as they fail to find their heritage religion meaningful, and this slide from religion to secularism is a major concern for religious communities. It is a slide that Christian Education over the years failed to halt. Questioning and doubt are part of a natural process of growing up as young people test their beliefs and ideas against their experience and the views of others. Inhibiting thoughtful investigation through teaching which is dogmatic inevitably makes religious 'certainties' seem empty and meaningless. In contrast, raising the academic status of religious enquiry, encouraging pupils to be more informed and discerning about religion and

religious issues should create interest and enthusiasm; this multi-faith R.E. has tried, within limited resources, to do. The fear of indoctrinating is an old neurosis. The 1944 Education Act enabled teachers to refuse to teach R.E. on grounds of conscience as they would have to teach as true doctrines they did not believe. In R.E., indoctrination has come to mean teaching Christianity as true and other faiths (either explicitly or implicitly) as false. The other options are however less than clear. One is to secularise the study of religion so no religion is taught as true but as social and cultural phenomena. R.E. then would focus on externals and never get to the heart of what it means to be religious. Another is to teach all religions *as though true* and suspend personal opinions during the teaching and during the study. This has the advantage that pupils from each faith group feel supported and empowered and deepen the understanding of their own faith at the same time as other pupils find the teaching educationally enlightening. Its disadvantage is that some teachers and pupils find suspension of judgement difficult, feeling a sense of disloyalty to their own beliefs. However, it is a process of opening the mind to new perspectives, which is more likely to deepen understanding of one's own beliefs in a positive way rather than to wreck them altogether. It is therefore to be encouraged, and lies at the heart of the phenomenological approach. The dynamic nature of learning seems threatening to those whose thought processes are static: they retort through another powerful media metaphor - *the confusing mishmash*, a mixed-up religious syncretism, as though differences of opinion are to be avoided. In contrast, controversy and the diversity of belief are the very heart and nature of the subject.

A dynamic approach to R.E., giving priority to process rather than facts, develops skills and flexibility of approach:

- not judging prematurely;
- looking beyond the obvious and superficial to seek different levels of meaning;
- recognising that our understanding is partial; widening and deepening the concept of "truth".

Truth is itself a difficult concept. The verifiability test of logical positivists is not only narrow but by no means absolute we might tomorrow dismiss a verification we made yesterday. Truth might seem 'obvious': yet the word 'obvious' more often hides an opinion rather than a truth. Stuart Hall comments:

> "Social science is about deconstructing the obvious, it is about showing people that the things they immediately feel to be 'just like that" aren't quite 'just like that"" (Hall 1980: 6; cf. Troyna and Carrington 1990: 3).

Truth also suggests a coherent world view, in which everything fits. There are many and various world views, each equally coherent and equally // humanity's capacity for evil as well as good.

Education needs to counter racism and prejudice. The struggle against racism is as much within ourselves as in broader society. The school is a microcosm: we can "see schools as sites of struggle" (Cole, 1986: 127). The education system can be viewed as "a site in which the reproduction of racism is achieved and confirmed" (Troyna and Carrington. 1990: 20). R.E. can help pupils and teachers to understand the nature of this struggle and through dialogue and discussion shape it into something creative and transforming. How free should speech be? R.E. teachers need to remember that discussion can support and sustain prejudice. Contributions to debate are often made by few individuals: racist and prejudiced comments may be remembered long after the teacher's retort has been forgotten. Nationally and internationally, the ideal of free speech is curtailed to prevent people wilfully abusing others. R.E. need not provide a platform for racist bigots.

Racism is a white problem (Cole, 1986: 128-133): the place where attention to it is most needed, the mainly white school, can often be the place where the problem is least perceived and prejudice is most deeply rooted (Troyna and Hatcher 1992). R.E. needs to examine power relationships between people, and between faith or life stances: whom does power benefit? how do they maintain their power? R.E. can offer a radical social and ethical critique.

School worship should not be allowed to damage learning about equality: ERA's wording is crucial. Worship should not be narrowly denominational but wholly or for the most part reflect the broad traditions of Christian teaching. It should not ape Christian ritual but explicitly or implicitly incorporate appropriate and relevant ideas found in Christian teaching. Many of these ideas are shared with other faiths. Worship on ethical themes implicitly reflect Christian teachings, and demonstrating that at least half do so will keep a school safe from possible prosecution. In practice, some of the acts of worship will explicitly relate to Christianity, others to other religions and a sense of balance can be achieved even under the present unnecessary and unwise law.

Worship in a school context cannot be the same as worship in a believing community. In particular religions, worship focuses on particular beliefs and traditions in accordance with specific teachings and theological ideas. The faith is given, the traditions handed down. In school, collective worship takes place in an open inquiring community with a range of beliefs and traditions. Worship must be educational rather than instructional, exploratory rather than definitive, imprecise in its focus (or at least fairly balanced) and edifying to the religious from each faith tradition, and to the non-religious alike. It needs to highlight and celebrate ways of exploring and expressing personal meaning, worth and value.

CONCLUSION

The nature and aims of R.E., in the light of ERA, are still problematic. This article has argued that R.E. is much more than a body of knowledge but needs to focus in particular on intercultural relationships and build up the awarenesses and skills necessary for successful inter-faith dialogue. The aim of R.E. is to enable young people to go into adult life with the enthusiasm and skills to // respond with respect, curiosity and understanding when encountering religious people from any tradition. They will be able to perceive and overcome barriers and obstacles to successful dialogue. They will be aware of the contribution inter-faith studies can make to intercultural understanding, and can engage positively in political discourses pertaining to religion, religious freedom, interfaith understanding and racism. R.E. can make a significant contribution to the task of preparing young people for living in a plural society based on justice, openness and respect. Its curriculum needs to be based on respect and to foster respect, giving fair consideration of truth claims, offering balance, supporting not destroying faith, stimulating understanding through accurate information, and involving faith members in producing appropriate curriculum materials.

If this is so, primary and secondary R.E. will be affected and enhanced, involving agreed syllabuses and examination syllabuses. There are implications also for the training of teachers to achieve this.

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Postscript 2007

This paper came from a period when I was teaching religious education in teacher training to primary and secondary teachers and student teachers. I had just finished a two year secondment to Birmingham Compact (see Bigger, 1996, 2000a), working with inner city schools to motivate pupils to achieve in school. Also part of the context was that the way the educational agenda of the 1988 Education Reform Act was rolling out. I was particularly concerned about the accusation of 'multi-faith mishmash', a political caricature in the attempt to promote a pro-Christian religious education. This paper explains misunderstandings in terms of lack of teacher expertise and training rather than inherent in the subject itself. I return to these thoughts later (Bigger 2000b; 2003)

It is fair to say that I see the necessity for this emphasis on equity and values as a whole curriculum issue rather than one for religious education alone. With a staff team, mainly from Westminster College, Oxford where I then worked, produced a book for teachers covering the whole curriculum with a particular focus on spiritual, moral, social and cultural education (Bigger and Brown, 1999). This presented 'spiritual education' in a secular way, as part of personal education getting children to think about what kind of person they really are, and what potential they have – all part of the question of what it means to be human. Some, it is true, may give their answers in language involving God, whilst others will not. My interest is what kinds of *human insights* into self concept and morality God language actually implies: in other words, can we decode God-metaphors humanistically? A revision of my 1988 paper on this is being edited for this respository.

In my view, religious education has not grasped the issues I raise in this paper and its points are still pertinent. The success for the subject educationally should be measured by the extent it prepares pupils for harmonious cooperation in a multi-religious yet secular world. Media Islamophobia is the clearest exaple from this decade that things are not going well. One case-study in dialogue (Bigger, 2006) on *hijaab* (dress-code) brought the issue of respect into sharp relief, when one journal, after

successful refereeing, refused to publish it since, it claimed, "this is not the time to give succour to the Muslim community at a time when their young men are trying to kill us". Since its publication, the issue of hijaab has been in the forefront of political and media attention, and its pros and cons, recorded in my paper, are being actively discussed by Muslim women.

Stephen Bigger, 22 April 2007.

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