



# Why we need good RE

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**Geoff Teece: University of Birmingham: Keynote address given to the National Association of SACREs Annual General Meeting on June 4<sup>th</sup> 2009.**

## **Introduction**

SACREs more than most, know of how well RE can potentially contribute to social/community cohesion. In particular we have the success of the Westhill funded project on Young Peoples' Faith Forums. And I'm sure there are other community projects too.

What I want to do however is to offer some thoughts about what we might call mainstream curriculum RE. I want to ask questions like 'Why does RE matter in the curriculum? What distinctive contribution can it make-as opposed to citizenship for example and, Why does our national and global community need good RE?

## **Why do we need good RE?**

To begin with the last question first! Consider these two quotations

*Increasingly one hears a distaste for the polemics of the New Atheist debate and its foghorn volume, and how it has drowned out any other conversation about religion: what it is, the loss of it, whether it matters, and what happens in a post-religious society.*

*The decline of religious faith has left behind a real and widespread need for wisdom and insight; the media offers only a cruel sentimentality and gives little space to the most difficult of our life experiences such as failure, death or envy...( **Madeleine Bunting: Real debates about faith are drowned by the New Atheists' foghorn voices: The Guardian 6 April 2009.**)*

Bunting highlights some key issues here for understanding religion in society in general and, by extension, in RE in particular. I agree with what she says and furthermore it is my contention is that we won't have a healthy community if our citizens are not educated; if they are ill informed and basically ignorant of the contribution that religion can make to our public discourse.

She goes on;

*"...the modern distortion was to make God into a proposition in which you either did or did not believe.....So the media has been promoting the wrong argument, while the bigger question of how, in a post-religious*

*society, people find the myths they need to sustain meaning, purpose and goodness in their lives go unexplored* **Madeleine Bunting: Real debates about faith are drowned by the New Atheists' foghorn voices: The Guardian 6 April 2009.**

Now, of course religious people **do** believe things and RE should take account of such beliefs but as Ninian Smart said- religious ideas are not just ideas but *religious ideas*.

*it would be facile to think of religious ideas as existing just in people's heads or on paper. They can only be properly understood in their living milieu. Thus Christian theology has to be seen in its institutional and sacramental environment. It has to do with faith, with people, with worship. It is not just a piece of metaphysics, and not a free-floating ideology* **Ninian Smart Secular Education and the logic of religion (London, Faber and Faber 1968**

So we need our pupils to understand religious beliefs within the context of religious faith. If we can do this then I believe that RE has the potential for young people-and future adults and media commentators! to consider religion intelligently and to discuss it meaningfully and, let's be honest, give it a fair hearing.

### **So what its distinctive contribution?**

It has become axiomatic that our pupils should learning from religion. Now the processes of learning from religion are well rehearsed. These terms were first developed by two of my ex colleagues, Michael Grimmitt and Garth Read. Grimmitt's classic and definitive account is to be found in his 1987 study *Religious Education & Human Development*:

*When I speak about pupils **learning about religion** I am referring to what the pupils learn about the beliefs, teachings and practices of the great religious traditions of the world. I am also referring to what pupils learn about the nature and demands of ultimate questions, about the nature of a 'faith' response to ultimate questions, about the normative views of the human condition and what it means to be human as expressed in and through Traditional Belief Systems or Stances for Living of a naturalistic kind.....*

*When I speak about **learning from religion** I am referring to what pupils learn from their studies in religion about themselves-about discerning ultimate questions and 'signals of transcendence' in their own experience and considering how they might respond to them.....The process of learning from religion involves, I suggest, engaging two though different types of evaluation. Impersonal Evaluation involves being able to distinguish and make critical evaluations of truth claims, beliefs and*

*practices of different religious traditions and of religion itself.....*  
*Personal evaluation begins as an attempt to confront and evaluate*  
*religious beliefs and values [and] becomes a process of self-evaluation*  
**(Michael Grimmitt Religious Education & Human Development 1987**  
**pp225-6).**

These terms have since been incorporated in a number of 'official' documents, for example QCA' Non Statutory Guidance in 2000 and The Non statutory Framework for RE (2004).

The use of them as pedagogical strategies, however, has often been criticised for example by Ofsted in 2007:

*In many cases, teachers perceive that AT1 work is essentially descriptive and a lower order of challenge. They assume that short answers are all that is required to check basic knowledge and understanding. More extended answers are always linked to AT2 alone. As a result, AT1 tasks too often demand that pupils 'report on' or 'write about' rather than asking them to analyse and process the material. **Making Sense of Religion Ofsted June 2007, p 10).***

Whilst these comments on teaching and learning processes are important, the issue I would like to concentrate on is the question of what *is* it that pupils should be learning about in the first place. If we take an example from a recent Agreed Syllabus we can notice that it refers to *religious data* but what does it mean by *religious data*?

*The purpose of learning from religion is to enable pupils to become more skilled in responding to **religious data** based on a clear knowledge and deeper understanding of it. This requires them to be able to interpret the significance of the data for themselves, for others, for their community and for the world, and apply it to life. Learning from religion is about having an informed, reflective, personal response, engaging with and interpreting the views of others, evaluating and applying the conclusions to life. **Herefordshire Agreed Syllabus 2001***

### **What does it mean to be human?**

First let me refer to a section of the National Framework's statement on the importance of RE;

*Religious Education provokes challenging questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, beliefs about God, the self and the nature of reality, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human (QCA 2004).*

I like this; especially the bit that says 'what it means to be human'. I worked on the Westhill Project in the 1990s and the project's key overarching question for RE was 'What does it mean to be human?' And we can easily see how this has influenced many agreed syllabuses in RE which often depict the aim of the subject to include pupils being able to make links between their study of religions and associated (ultimate) questions derived from our shared human experience.

Of course we don't necessarily need religion to ask big questions in life. Asking ultimate questions is not only the preserve of the religious. If you read good literature you will explore the question 'What does it mean to be human'. I guess you can also explore watching Coronation Street or Eastenders.

### **Ways to study religion**

And there are many ways to study religion and there are many different definitions of religion. In the professional world of religious education the study of religion has been firmly located in the move away from a theological approach to a multi-dimensional approach as understood by the discipline of religious studies. So religion can be studied from an historical, sociological or psychological point of view, for example. Whilst many religious educators today will not see a problem with this, one can still ask the question: if the kind of Christian education that predated modern approaches to the subject attempted to enable students to understand the world from a Christian point of view, what is it to understand the world from a broadly religious point of view?

I think it is a question worth asking because if there is something distinctive about a religious view of experience, our pupils should be enabled to understand it. But how does one conceptualise this? In my own work over a number of years I have been interested in applying John Hick's interpretation of religion, as articulated below, to religious education.

*There are many general interpretations of religion. These have usually been either naturalistic, treating religion as a purely human phenomenon or, if religious, have been developed within the confines of a particular confessional conviction which construes all other traditions in its own terms. The one type of theory that has seldom been attempted is a religious but not confessional interpretation of religion in its plurality of forms.* **John Hick An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent Macmillan 1989, p1.**

Of course many might warn us that any attempt to look for commonality in spirituality or religiousness is bound to fail because religions are essentially different. What it means to be a Christian is fundamentally different than what it means to be a Buddhist. Furthermore, any attempt to define religion is doomed. For example, one cannot, as many dictionaries do, define religion in terms of the worship of God. That would exclude Buddhists straight away and, anyway; it depends on what we mean by God!

Nevertheless, I do think it is important for teachers to develop a view as to what is significant about religion for human beings. What is *religious* about religion rather than say historical or sociological? And how best might we understand religion to make sense of its purported relationship to human experience.

### **Religion as human transformation**

Now, if we consider the great post-axial religions, firstly and very importantly they all take a particular view of what it means to be human and what is meant by human transformation.

Human transformation may be understood in two dimensions. Firstly, all the 'major' religions conceive of human nature and experience as being essentially unsatisfactory. Indeed this is the meaning of the Buddhist term *dukkha*. Because humans are subject to *tanha* (craving) life is never satisfactory. We crave for that which we do not possess which leads to a constant experience of life as less than satisfactory. This human experience is caused by our spiritual blindness or *avidya* (Sanskrit); this spiritual blindness is the first link in the chain of causes of human suffering, referred to as the Doctrine of Dependent Origination.

*Avidya* is a key concept that underpins the two other indigenous religious traditions of India. In Hinduism, *avidya* leads to *maya* (illusion about that which is truly real) leading to attachment to the world of *samsara* with all its suffering and unhappiness. For Sikhs, *avidya* and *maya* cause the condition known as *haumai* which means ego or I- centredness. A person who is subject to *haumai* is known as *manmukh*.

In the Semitic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, this unsatisfactoriness is understood largely in moral terms. In human nature there is a tendency to 'fall away' from God. In Christianity it is through 'fallenness' caused by the sin of the first human beings in the Garden of Eden. This causes human beings to live a life alienated from God.

In Judaism, whilst there is no conception of 'original sin', human beings are created with free will, with its constant tension between our evil inclination, *yetzer ha-ra*, and good inclination, *yetzer ha-tov*.

In Islam, although human beings are created with the capacity to understand and live by the absolute qualities of God - such as goodness, beauty and truth - our earthly existence with its need for survival often causes us to be weak and fallible. Hence the tendency to be subject to 'forgetfulness of God' or *ghafla*.

However, the religious traditions also provide for human beings a vision and a path of a limitlessly better life, conceived in quite radically different ways, in which human beings may achieve liberation from, and transformation of, a self-centred and unsatisfactory existence. John Hick refers to this as 'cosmic optimism' (John Hick [1989], *An Interpretation of Religion*, Macmillan, pp56-69).

Religions provide a means by which humans may become more complete, more whole or holy.

For the Buddhist, it consists of understanding the four noble truths, following the eightfold path and five precepts in a path of meditation and 'skilful living', developing the qualities of *metta* (loving kindness) and *karuna* (compassion) leading to the state of *nibbana*.

For Hindus, the path consists in following one's dharma and practising non-attachment to develop good karma leading to *moksha*.

For the Sikh, following a path of *nam simran* (keeping God constantly in mind) and *sewa* (selfless service) and hence developing *gurmukh* (God-centredness) leads to a state of *mukhti*.

Jews may attain atonement by bringing *kedusha* (God's holiness) into the world through the development of right relationships with fellow human beings and with God.

The Christian can achieve redemption through faith in Jesus Christ and by the development of what St. Paul calls the 'fruits of the spirit'.

Obedience to the will of Allah for a Muslim through religious practice based on the *shariah* and the inward spirituality of *tariqah* develops the virtues of an Islamic personality leading to paradise.

So, what I want to say is that if we take all this seriously we can view the phenomena of religion in a slightly transformed way. The beliefs, values and practices of religions are not just something to be studied as something 'out there', so to speak - as a scientist might study the world. So RE is not just about learning about Muslims because there are plenty of Muslims in Britain and we should be knowledgeable and tolerant towards the diversity of human groups in our society. No; we can learn about Islam because of the insights Islam can provide for us about what it means to be truly human. Of course, you may say that Islam, like any other tradition, can also provide us with insights into quite

the opposite. Indeed, religions are ambiguous constructions and are responsible for much evil as well as good. I wouldn't want to exclude that from RE, where and when appropriate.

Rather, I am suggesting the value of understanding particular religions as ways of life that people live - at their best - within a spiritual context of what it means to be truly human. And it is this human transformation element of religion that can I think enable us to see what lies at the core of the range of religious beliefs, values and practices as outlined in RE syllabuses.

This way of looking at religion is particularly well expressed by Wilfred Cantwell Smith:

*Religion is ... inherently human, and integrally so ... (I)f abstracted from ... the men and women whose humanity it informs it wilts, even if it is abstracted for the purposes of intellectual scrutiny ... It is not a thing but a quality: of personal life (both individual and social)*

*Those of us on the outside who would interpret to ourselves the Muslim must understand not his religion but his religiousness.*

*So for the Hindu, the Buddhist, the Tierra del Fuegin. If we would comprehend these we must look not at their religion but at the universe so far as possible through their eyes. It is what the Hindu is able to see, by being a Hindu that is significant. Until we can see it too, we have not come to grips with the religious quality of his life. And we can be sure that when he looks around him he does not see 'Hinduism'. Like the rest of us, he sees his wife's death, his child's minor and major aspirations, his money lender's mercilessness, the calm of a starlight evening, his own mortality. He sees things through coloured glasses, if one will, of a 'Hindu' brand.*

**Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1978), *The Meaning and End of Religion*, SPCK, p138**

In terms of the richest potential for students to learn from religion, I'm sure it would help a teacher teach better about Judaism if trips to the synagogue or learning about festivals was understood within a framework of needing to bring *kedusha* into the world.

Whilst the 5 Ks are important for Khalsa Sikhs (and I'm not saying we shouldn't teach about them), an exploration of the concept of *sewa* may be a richer source of learning about and from Sikh values. This latter can be explored at many different levels; it can be considered most basically as service for the benefit of others, counting one's own needs and desires as less important than those of others, or, at a deeper level, it can be considered as the continuous striving to remove *haumai* or the ego in order to be closer to God.

## So why does it matter again?

I remember a debate in the pages of the Guardian some years ago about whether in Christianity there can be a gospel for the rich. It was begun by an article by the famous atheist philosopher AC Grayling who had questioned the relevance of Jesus' teachings about it being easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. All through this debate-or so it seemed to me- the protagonists had missed the point-the common interpretation was that this was a hard line moral teaching about money being seen as the root of all evil-when in fact it is the *love* of money that is the root of all evil. So what had been missed is the deep and profound spiritual teaching of this passage. Grayling and others might have drawn understanding from the Hindu teaching that two key aims of life for one in the 'householder' stage of the *four ashramas*, are *artha* (material wealth) and *kama* (sexual pleasure) but that these are only spiritually healthy (as depicted in the image of Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and prosperity) if understood and practised within the context of the lotus blossom of enlightenment. Arguably such an understanding might have alerted them to the deeper spiritual teaching of Jesus, which could be appropriately understood as a warning about the dangers of attachment to money.

There are, of course, other ways to interpret religion than I have offered here and our pupils should be entitled to understand these but it is important, I think, that what RE is concerned about-if it is to make a distinctive contribution-is that we present religion to our pupils in a way that makes sense religiously.

Returning to Bunting's article that I mentioned at the beginning of my talk and the general thrust of what I have been trying to say, we can usefully consult the writings of James Fowler; in particular where he states;

*Many modern Westerners when encountering someone from another religious tradition are likely to ask what do you (they) believe? As if that were the key question. ....curiosity about what 'they believe', to reach any significant level of depth, has to become the question of faith: 'On what or whom do you set your heart? To what vision of right-relatedness between humans, nature and the transcendent are you loyal? What hope and what ground of hope animate you and give shape to the force field of your life and how you move into it?'* **James Fowler: Stages of Faith Harper & Row 1981.**

It is by understanding what lies and what doesn't lie at the heart of our religious traditions that we can truly understand appreciate each other.