

SPEECH

Title: SACREs, Schools and Society: Building Bridges Across the Fault-lines

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Thank you for inviting me to speak at your conference today. It is a great privilege to be here to celebrate the silver jubilee of NASACRE and its championship of the work of SACREs in support of schools and communities across the country for 25 years. This is, coincidentally, the same length of time as I have been in the profession as a teacher of RE and (for the past 12 years) as a headteacher with a total commitment to social justice, viewing state education as a public good with a wider social purpose than individual, private benefit. This philosophical stance on education leads to a particular view of the role of religious education in a school's provision – a role that is fundamental to the formal curriculum – and a role that has a wider importance within schooling. And so the title of this conference – Stronger Together: Celebrating the Power of Community – is for me a very fitting subject for discussion today as we think about the next 25 years and what we want for our children.

I want to focus on three themes in this talk:

1. The character of social change, especially as we live through the technology revolution, with all its benefits and challenges
2. The role of RE in schools, its nature and purpose in a harmonious, enlightened and prosperous society
3. Our responsibility to our nation's children, their future and a less dystopian, more utopian world

1. The Character of Social Change in the Early Twenty First Century

We are in a period of time unlike any other. Society is shifting shape. The information and communications technology revolution, for example, brings with it many benefits; it also brings considerable challenges. Other scientific advancements, such as the ability to travel quickly between countries, and innovations in artificial intelligence, are changing interactions between people in ways that, 70 years ago, when Beveridge wrote the report which established a state secondary education system that was free at the point of delivery, society could not imagine.

Education is in many ways in a very different place to then. As a result of technological change, there is a generational divide between young people and those over 30 years old. The creation of the worldwide web in 1989 following hard on the heels of the developing internet brought changes to living for younger people that deeply affect our existence. Education is altering its character as a result of more powerful access to information, the rise of virtual reality experience and the ability for communication across the world at any time of day or night – 24-7. The web has changed in one stroke what is possible in a classroom. Thus, it has also changed the nature

of schools; most teachers' own experience of learning was very different. The technology revolution has had other social effects too.

Space and time has compressed. Communication through the worldwide web and the internet is more immediate and crosses continental distances in a moment. This intensifies human existence and speeds up the pace of life. Whilst this is powerful for some – more can be achieved more quickly and globally than ever before – it creates distance for others, for example where connectivity is a challenge.

An underlying sense of 'risk' is also at large within society, fired by insecurities about power and the erosion of the nation state and its cultural institutions such as authority. Information technology through the web gives free access to an ever-changing, kaleidoscopic range of worldviews, life stances, beliefs and cultures – windows into the lives of others. For many, this is empowering and enriching – but for at least half our society (as we saw in the Brexit vote) it is deeply troubling. Fear of 'the other' looms large for some, especially in relation to loss of control of culture, money and power. Economic migration fuels the fear, un-helped by the dystopian picture of our world that is often portrayed. The fault-lines appear down the lines of race and religion.

You can see this from these slides which baldly illustrate the problems faced just by one community – my own, in Tower Hamlets, where I run schools. The fault-lines are clearly visible. The free expression of Islamophobia for a long time has seemed to pass uninhibited. Terror attacks since 9/11 seem to have given some the sense that they can freely articulate with impunity their suspicion and hatred of what they regard as 'the other' – in this case of Islam. The register of Muslims proposed by the US president shortly after his election is redolent of Hitler's early days and the Nazis' institutionalization of anti-semitism. The recent 'Punish a Muslim Day' letter that was sent to targeted individuals by a far right nationalist group in Britain was equally troubling. And so, despite the social advancements there have been since the Second World War ended, we find ourselves full circle in a time of social division exposed in racism or anti-religious feeling – often the two are conflated.

For me, this goes right to the heart of why religious education is one of the most important subjects in our curriculum.

In 1943, when legislation for education was being considered and preparations were started for post-war reconstruction, we were in the midst of war: a war which people like my grandparents fought because they believed they were fulfilling a duty to God and humankind in combating evil. The experience of world war and the uncovering of the Holocaust – the end point of supremacism if left unchecked – created a moment in which many people deeply re-thought their ideals. This has often been forgotten by the public at large as it passes out of living memory – as has the rationale for the establishment of the welfare state, of which free secondary education was a part. These things were the means by which we would battle against the 'five giants' of the Beveridge Report.

The 'five giants' were the evils that held back a progressive and fair society. Disease was one of the giants – hence the National Health Service – and ignorance another, hence the state education system as we have it now.

People believed at the end of the Second World War that it was time to deliver a better future for this country through an education for all that would safeguard us from the occurrence of such atrocities again. They sought to heal the divisions – to bridge the fault-lines of class and

social mobility, of poverty and disempowerment. Education was a fundamental part of this project.

There were a number of ways in which the education system was then designed to guard against any possibility of, for example, anti-semitism actively being taught through a national curriculum in schools. It included the enshrinement of religious education as a subject to be taught in schools to children of every age. It was the only subject required by the law. In drawing up the 1944 Act, RA Butler – the minister of the time – stated he felt he was giving recognition to a widespread desire that religion should be included in the curriculum and life of a school and Churchill supported this.

The role of RE in schools was seen to be closely connected with fighting against intolerance, injustice, genocide and dictatorship. It was connected to pupils' spiritual and moral development – to the spiritual and moral health of the nation - and to the establishment of a good society where there existed a social safety net for the poor, equality of access in education and health and the opportunity for social mobility. This would be a new and progressive post-war society with a vision for equality, human dignity and flourishing for the public good – RE was to be a very important part of this for all the reasons described.

I support the wisdom of this for today, albeit with a different character for the subject than was envisaged at the time of post-war Britain. The fault-lines remain even though British society has changed since the war, becoming religiously, racially and culturally very diverse and much work has been done over the years to improve social mobility and cohesion. Technological and scientific transformations have advanced many of our powers but, as with all deep social change, societal insecurities have reared their head and the rifts are evident.

RE has a pivotal role in helping young people in an informed way to think through their responses to encounters with beliefs and ideas they feel alien to, in a manner which benefits society rather than divides it through bigotry and racism. Like no other subject, it gets to the heart of what it means to be human and allows space for debate on deep spiritual and religious issues – many of which are closely allied to race and culture and some of which therefore have the potential to be incredibly sensitive or controversial – in a safe environment, handled by skilled teachers, in a young person's most formative years. I agree with the Swann Report of 1985 "Education for All" which argued for RE as

"the best and only means of enabling all pupils, from whatever religious background, to understand the nature of religious belief, the religious dimension of human experience and the plurality of faiths in contemporary Britain".

This I have experienced in the classroom as a teacher and in school leadership as a headteacher. My early career was formative in this respect and is illustrative of the importance of RE, its role and character and the points I have just made.

2. The Role of RE in Schools, its Nature and Purpose in a Harmonious, Enlightened and Prosperous Society

My first post after qualifying in 1993 was in a school where, prior, RE had hardly featured in the curriculum offer before. When I started, we had 5 sets of 30 text books between the two of us (15 each). There were no artifacts and no worksheets. There were rudimentary schemes of work not fit for purpose. There was no display. At KS4, the compulsory RE element was 6 weeks of 1 period on a carousel. The short course in RE did not exist then but we had a new Local Agreed syllabus that year (in response to the Swann Report and the 1988 Education Reform Act) which

focused on six world faiths and humanism – so things were beginning to look brighter locally despite the lack of resources. The SACRE was active and I was able to draw upon the help of one of their number in particular.

Partly as a result of the school's failure previously to offer a proper provision for RE, I found myself on the frontline of deep racial divide which I regard as one of the biggest threats to a civilized society. The community of my first school had significant presence from far-right groups proselytizing racist extremism and white supremacy. The school did not have an anti-racism policy and they left out teaching about India because they could not deal with the racist backlash from pupils. I am not sure if you can imagine what it was like when I started to teach Y9 about Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and Y10 Judaism and the Holocaust within such a context. I had boys like Billy* laughing at the massacre of Sikhs in the Golden Temple by General Dyer; I had Alfie* proclaiming in a documentary on the Holocaust that he could work for Hitler. Martin Luther King was met with some level of respect – until we got on to deeper discussion about slavery, its legacy, the civil rights movement in the 1960s and institutional racism, at which point the barriers went up. This is not an acceptable situation and the implications for society of allowing this to prevail in a school anywhere are obvious.

So it became the focus of my work to try and deal with this through what I did in the classroom, in my department with my one other colleague and within the wider activities of the school for 4 – 5 years. I won't rehearse in detail what I did but it included getting really good results, curriculum change, SMSCD, contributing to a major exhibition on Islam and holding several festivals of religion, belief and culture which included one in which the school's staff constituted my visiting speakers. Superficial change is possible fairly quickly – children will stop saying things in front of you (which is a good start) and they will write answers to questions that you want to see but you can also get deep attitudinal change over a 5 year period through RE – and I have seen this.

I also engaged directly with the Ealing SACRE, which as I mentioned had launched its locally agreed syllabus. There I encountered Brother Daniel Faivre – I am sure some of you will have known him. A Jesuit priest placed to work in Southall, West London. He began work there to bring about harmony and understanding between different faith groups in 1979, during a period of violent unrest in the predominantly Sikh and Muslim community and spent 28 years there establishing inter-faith dialogue. His work was remarkable. He believed in the supreme importance of the dignity of the human person, irrespective of creed and culture or social condition and so he brought people from different faith and non-faith groups together to meet on a monthly basis and to visit each other's places of worship. He also established a multi-faith pilgrimage.

The work was deep, sensitive and subtle, undertaken with deep respect and in an atmosphere of generosity and kindness. Fostering trust and understanding through sharing text, prayer, reflection, meditation and food, he worked at the dialogue between people – the crucible of mutuality and human understanding. I borrowed much for my RE classroom from watching him work both on SACRE and in the community. And I came to the conclusion that RE has within its role a social purpose and that there are three ways in which a school could contribute to the building of bridges across deep social divide.

a) The development of literacy in religions and worldviews, as well religious literacy: what I mean by this is that people need to be well-informed. RE is a rigorous, diverse, academic discipline that is rich in content and requires students to master tools of study peculiar to itself such as being able to identify truth-claims, and how to use and interpret religious language or symbolism.

Just as science requires students to accomplish the skills of scientific investigation, so religious study requires students to be familiar with the process of, say, critical philosophical argument. There is mastery of the skills of religious dialogue and the quest to uncover truth as expounded in religious frameworks of belief and those of worldviews such as humanism. There is a raft of technical language, some of which is highly mysterious. There is the need to know religions and worldviews well enough to identify when false claims are being made in the interests of persuasion to a particular course of action – to know when you are being exploited or when propaganda is governing the truth – to know when hatred or fear of others is dominating a particular discourse.

I have found that the more challenging the students are, the more they love the academic experience of RE. To be in the intellectual realm of ideas, beliefs, reasoning, debate and argument – to dissect concepts – to feel passionate about moral and ethical principles and learn how to articulate your response in a convincing and persuasive way – there is little more exciting than this for all of us in that classroom. Students are so bright and clever, their minds so agile and this applies as much in an inner city classroom as it does in a grammar school but in both contexts (differently), it takes on a particular character. Survival for young people on some of the large inner London housing estates like the White City estate or Sand's End requires creativity, the ability to think through and respond to challenging situations rapidly and the sophisticated use of a particular genre of language which changes all the time. As a teacher, you learn to use those things for the foundation and extension of academic study. You start with the context you have and build learning from there. Tackling the nature of God and learning to use confidently the religious and philosophical language associated with academic discussion of this has yielded some memorable learning moments for me.

For example, in learning about the omnipresence, omnipotence and omniscience of God in my second school one day, carefully avoiding blasphemy, the pupils talked about the headteacher's use of the tannoy in school. The students pointed out that the head, although unseen, just seemed to know everything that was going on everywhere all the time; he seemed to be everywhere all the time through his use of the tannoy, which went to every room in the school; and from this tannoy, he sometimes issued instructions – hence his appearance of being all powerful. We moved on in our learning to religious experience and miracles as one of the arguments for the existence of God.

MIRACLE STORY

Being properly informed and equipped to deal intellectually with a sophisticated understanding of religion, equips students to enter meaningfully into dialogue with new frameworks of belief and people as they encounter them. But they also need confidence in their own sense of self. This brings me to the second way in which RE contributes to bridge-building across the divide.

b) Rich personal development: this is sometimes referred to as 'character education' – I think, though, that I mean more than is often envisaged by that term. What I am talking about here is a religious education that does a number of things for the individual's sense of self. It helps a student to develop:

- Awareness of her / his own identity and beliefs
- Skills and dispositions such as imagination, self-reflection, sensitivity, critical and analytical thinking
- An enquiring, thoughtful, open mind with a strong understanding of the wider world
- Awareness of what it means to be a young man or woman in 21st century Britain

- Confidence in one's beliefs and the ability to articulate them along with the resilience to meet challenges to these and the ability to change in response as appropriate

I am talking about RE which contributes to strong moral, spiritual, social and cultural development for young people. It combines subject-based knowledge with personal development and the growth of a student's identity.

Experience has taught me that for a young person, the ability to be confident in who you are and to have the skills to manage this effectively in response to the challenges of the external world is fundamental to individual well-being. I have seen this in many settings but perhaps the most illustrative of this is at Mulberry School for Girls, where I have found myself again on the frontline of racism in a different way than before. I mentioned earlier in this talk the experience of Muslim pupils and their families and showed some slides. The Islamophobia I have seen experienced by members of my community on a repeated basis over the past decade or more has been shocking. It goes from thinly veiled Islamophobia and racism to outright, open attack. Girls and families have reported being spat at in the street. Recently, on her way to an International Women's Day celebration at the school, one of my mothers was assaulted and almost pushed into the road in front of cars – fortunately, members of the public intervened.

Journalists have written about my girls at the theatre in the most appalling way – here is an excerpt from just one article

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In this onslaught of bigotry and racism, we have to equip pupils to be strong and confident in their identity, which fundamentally includes their religious belief or worldview. Private belief drives public action. A great religious education works at this interface in all sorts of ways, including being able to articulate and advocate on behalf of yourself and your community. Having been in discussion so often with people who have a deficit view of women in Islam, we gained the support of Michelle Obama, whose visit to Mulberry was the conversation changer we needed. Ever since, the interest in my girls is in their achievements and their ambitions as opposed to the headscarf or forced marriage. People, in the First Lady's words, 'see beyond the headscarf'. For now.

As a young person, how do you deal with this level of scrutiny and questioning of your faith and identity without becoming alienated from society or destructively angry or bitter? It has been our life's work at Mulberry to ensure that students are equipped, through religious education and the wider work of the school, to have a secure sense of identity, based on well-informed knowledge of their faith and the opportunity to articulate this in as many different settings as possible. This is so that they leave us confident in their ability to face down discrimination in as positive a way as they can – so that they are contributing to social harmony and working against division – a response that is one of 'generous peace'.

It has also been important for us to find platforms for the girls to advocate for themselves and their community and to speak up for who they really are. This is not to suggest that there isn't danger from forms of extremism that purport to be Islamic. However, the most fertile ground for extremism of any kind is when a young person feels voiceless and alienated from society – and when such alienation is ignored, as was the case in my first school's community. This brings me to the third way in which RE contributes to bridging the fault-lines in society.

c) Engaging in inter-faith dialogue and actively building bridges: beliefs influence how people live their lives privately and how they engage publicly through their interactions with society as a citizen or their relationships with others in the community or wider world. In the 21st century, it is necessary to have an objective understanding of, and a critical engagement with, the beliefs of others (religious, philosophical and ethical) truthfully represented. A superficial or wrong understanding of religions yields conflict and division, the implications of which can be devastating for individuals, families and communities. In the RE classroom, one encounters deep questions for young people that are raised by modern existence to which they must find answers situated in a proper understanding of what they are dealing with and not some kind of post-truth analysis of the kind that we have recently seen and which has been so damaging.

There have been many lesson moments in my career which are illustrative of the need for young people, in this era of 'high modernity', to have knowledge and experience of how a particular response to life is governed underneath by belief. For example: talking in a lesson with students about the belief of some Christians in becoming 'one flesh' through sexual intercourse, the resulting lifelong bond of marriage and the reason why someone opposes sex before marriage and divorce; talking about the hijab in Islam, its meaning and symbolism, for many its feminism (taking the definition of feminism as equality between women and men), and the controversy in France over its possible ban in public places such as schools; talking about the five K's in Sikhism, the deep religious significance of uncut hair and wearing a turban to work on a construction site which requires a safety helmet; and a year before 9/11, talking through issues raised with me about religious beliefs concerning usury and its perceived connection with capitalism and world trade structures – the subject of angry discussion in local religious supplementary schools – and let's be clear, this was not in Tower Hamlets.

This last example is one that I often think about – a young, black Muslim man who had fled Somalia and who was angry with capitalism, the US and Israel. He talked to me a lot about the difficulties of the world over the course of his RE lessons and how to live within a prevailing social structure that doesn't fit with your faith. Finally, on his last day of school he asked me what I believe about God. Now I have a policy of not talking about this with students unless it is their last day – or mine – for all sorts of reasons to do with the power and influence of the teacher. Mostly, students forget to ask when they leave but this young man didn't. So I told him. I told him that if God is just and loving, then there cannot be only one way towards God. In Brother Daniel's words, 'The lamps are many, but the light is one.' I remember his response – and in that moment we built a permanent bridge across the divide.

Not long after that moment came 9/11 and the divide that I had been dealing with in my classroom opened as a deep chasm on the world stage, the implications of which are now playing out in war, terror and destruction perpetrated on all sides in all sorts of different ways with attempts by people to legitimize these actions by drawing upon religion and often rhetoric designed to induce public, wide-spread 'fear of the other'. This is often achieved through the reduction of such critical national or world issues to single un-factual tweets, repeated over and over again and accepted uncritically because they reflect what people want to believe rather than what is true. Interfaith dialogue and the tools it develops for future adult life in a super-complex society are essential work in the RE classroom to break all of this down.

Never, in my view, has there been a time since the second world war when good RE in schools and therefore good RE teachers were more important. We have to have specialists in the classroom who are prepared to – and trained to – get to the heart of the issues and beliefs driving these conflicts and have space for pupils to encounter them and learn to deal with them

constructively, positively, confidently, secure in their own sense of self and able within a controlled environment to find a way through.

This brings me to my third and final point and to our responsibilities as schools and SACREs working together to build bridges across the fault-lines.

3. SACREs, Schools, RE and the Integrity of Society

SACREs have done great work for more than 25 years. They have worked locally to achieve consensus over what should be taught in RE classrooms – provision that reflects both the national expectation and local priorities. In some cases, they have challenged poor practice in schools where headteachers are not fulfilling the entitlement for students. In some cases, they have faced down legal challenge from those who wish to dominate the agreed syllabus in favour of one religious perspective or another. They have also in some cases, like that of Brother Daniel, supported a significant contribution to local inter-faith dialogue and strengthening of community cohesion.

The role that SACREs have is an important one and it needs to grow and change with the world of the next 25 years that we are seeing coming over the horizon. The figures which the RE Council and other guardians of RE have produced concerning take up of the subject at GCSE and provision in KS1 – 3 are troubling. Pressures on curriculum and the fight for time and status by all subjects continues intensely. Performance levers, funding and curriculum time are the practical things that drive what headteachers offer – and where schools have more challenges in relation to these things, the danger for a subject which doesn't have currency in the system is real. Back at the beginning of my career, 25 years ago, this was the situation. Again, here we are. We need to consider a national body, a national entitlement and a statutory requirement for headteachers like me to publish online the provision they make for RE – in the same way that we do for SEN.

SACREs must start to consider a wider leadership role. SACREs are uniquely placed to help schools deliver on community cohesion and the building of social harmony. When I undertook a year long action research project on RE and KS2 – 3 transition in 1998, I had the opportunity to work with my counter-part Y6 teacher in a local primary and her class with my Y7 class. We created a unit of work that built in inter-faith dialogue and visits to faith communities. In the feedback, pupils talked about the power of direct engagement with faith other their own and of witnessing the lived experience. This has been a continuing theme from young people in my professional work since then.

Hence, the importance for me of your title for this conference. Stronger Together: the Power of Community. Leading such work in our schools would be truly transformative. It goes beyond content and intellectual engagement which, important as it is – as I have argued today already – it is not alive without the context.

“In many parts of the world....- not least in Britain and the USA – it is the integrity of society that is at stake. By the word ‘integrity’ I mean the organic unity of society, a unity that may as certainly be disrupted as enriched by religious and cultural diversity, especially if the educational implications are not understood, or if understood simply ignored.”

As a PGCE student in 1993, I read this article from which this one particular quotation has stayed with me – its truth struck me forcibly at the time. The experiences I have had since then – as outlined today – have led me to believe that RE (preferably alongside discreet Citizenship

education (at least in KS3) and a rich provision for wider spiritual, moral, social and cultural development) is evermore important as society comes to terms with a global age driven by the freedom, speed and power to make the truth mutable that information and communications technology has. Anthony Giddens was writing about this time on the subject of 'high modernity', the implications of technology, the growth of a global age and the tensions in society that would result as people's identity, sense of security and belonging are challenged.

So – no pressure then. This is our task. If we want to build a prosperous, creative, reflective and cohesive society – a civilized society – that is culturally and socially rich, as well as economically successful, then we must invest ourselves in the provision of an education for all which includes the very best practice of RE. SACREs have an important role to play in this, working shoulder to shoulder with schools and RE teachers.

Great RE gets to the heart of faith which, in its expression, has a direct impact on public life and the very essence of unity, integrity and humanity. Without it, education only skates the surface of the intricacy of interwoven beliefs and ideas that influence the dynamics of our 21st century world and ultimately affect the well-being and security of us all. RE has a unique and important contribution to make to the education of our young people in the way that I have outlined. So you and I have a job to do – and, I am arguing, a duty to do it – in remembering the post-war ideals which sought to create a harmonious, self-confident and fair society without fear of the other; in remembering what can happen if we do not pay proper attention to this in the education of our young; and in acting to bring about social harmony, security, prosperity and human flourishing, no matter what challenges we face.

**Names of pupils changed*