

Teaching Religious Education

Help! Not me, I'm a Christian!

Talking with Brian

I found myself thinking quite deeply after talking with Brian. Brian trained to teach RE at the old Borough Road Training College, showed promise as a skilled communicator and quickly gained promotion, becoming Head of the RE Department at Christ Church School, Finchley, a voluntary aided C of E school with a strong tradition in RE. As Biblical Studies gave way to a more multi-faith curriculum, he felt increasingly uneasy about teaching world religions, finally changed direction and is now Head of IT at a Hertfordshire School. Readers of *ACT Now* will know that even schools with a strong Christian tradition find it hard to recruit Christians to senior positions, including Heads of Department for RE. Is this because Christians feel that in some way they are compromising their faith by teaching the major world religions – festivals, holy books and all? For the card-carrying (or should I say, baptised) Christian, an essential pillar in her/his creed is the unambiguous statement 'Jesus is Lord' and she/he can refer to the textbook (the Bible) to support this view that Christianity makes unambiguous claims to be unique. John 14:16 or Exodus 20:3, for example, are pretty unequivocal in upholding this point of view. Jesus made it quite clear when

speaking with his disciples: 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no-one comes to the Father except by Me.' (John 14:6)

Six major religions

I had to work through this dilemma myself. In the 1960s I was Head of RE at Chichester High School for Boys and can well remember a gentle journey through the Synoptics for my 'O' level class. I believe I may have referred to other religions in my sixth form lessons, but I certainly did not make any systematic study of them. All this had totally changed by the time I began work at Watford Boys' Grammar School – I had no choice but to teach the world's major religions systematically throughout the school. Indeed this approach is now *de rigueur* in all state schools and, even if it were not compulsory, I would feel that I had not prepared my pupils to live in a multi-faith Britain if I had not given them some understanding of the main tenets of the six major religions.

But would I be compromising my personal commitment to Jesus Christ in doing this? Was I not taking my pupils a little way along the route to 'all roads lead to heaven'? With the help of a grant from Farmington Trust (and with guidance from

Trevor Cooling at the Stapleford Centre) I interviewed a number of committed Christians teaching a multi-faith RE curriculum in school, to discover how they coped and whether they wrestled with their faith in fulfilling their curricular obligations.

Indoctrination?

I was encouraged first to ask: What is our objective in teaching RE in school today? Should I allow my personal convictions to show, or should I resolve to stick to a strictly neutral approach? Clearly no teacher can offer a totally neutral view of her/his subject, whether the subject is the Holocaust in History, the beauty of Keats' poetry in English or the commitment of Muslims to keep Ramadan in RE. Like most Arts subjects, RE brings with it a series of values and the teacher cannot, and should not, attempt to be untrue to her/his point of view. Professor Brian Hill (for twenty years Professor of Education at Murdoch University, Perth) argues that RE is all about helping pupils to discover the truth about God and His world and to discuss the centrality of a personal faith as one of the key compass points in their lives – this is surely not neutral teaching!

But we need to remember that 'helping pupils to discover the truth about God' is not the same as indoctrinating them to believe that one's own religion is true and, by implication, every other religious belief, including those practised by some pupils in the class, is wrong.

What I would call 'the indoctrination approach' can be more subtle than just saying that one's own religion is the only right one. Indoctrination can occur when teachers deliberately miss out on mentioning key events or beliefs in other religions. For example, any lesson series which includes fasting must pay respect to Muslims' strict fasting in Ramadan – why they regard fasting as important and the careful adjustments that they make in their daily lifestyle pattern to ensure that they keep the fast properly.

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Shared goals

To return to the original question: What is our objective in teaching RE in school today? Surely our task is to offer our pupils education in religion and this must include enough information about the major world religions, including Christianity, to enable them to have a meaningful understanding of them. Whatever method we use, our task must be to prepare our pupils to live confidently in a multi-faith society, so they can learn to respect others' cultural and faith practices with understanding. To quote Trevor Cooling: 'This will entail navigating some very controversial matters, such as attitudes to the role of women in society. One of the shared goals of RE teaching can therefore be the promotion of key abilities like learning to listen to and to hear others, expressing one's own convictions in a sensitive and non-offensive manner and negotiating ways forward in situations of disagreement.' (Chapter 5, Commitment and Indoctrination: A Dilemma for RE, in L Broadbent and A Brown (Eds) *Issues in Religious Education*.)

But our objectives should take us further than merely informing our pupils about world religions. We believe that our own religion is important to us and affects the way we live and relate to others. If we can encourage the attitude that religion matters in our present secular, post-modernist society we shall have achieved a tremendous amount. If I taught Muslim girls at Slough Grammar School, or Jewish lads at Watford Grammar School for Boys, that my religion mattered to me and that I also recognised that theirs mattered to them too, then I had achieved a great deal.

So much for the theory! But how does it work out in practice? I interviewed several practising teachers, working in a variety of school situations, all of them committed Christians. In terms of the 'strength' of the RE Department within their schools, there was considerable variation.

Claire

Claire was Head of Department at an ecumenical Voluntary Aided school in a smart London suburb. RE had a strong position within the curriculum overall. Claire had, in fact, been responsible for broadening the RE syllabus to include Judaism and



Islam, with teaching about Sikhism and Hinduism in Years 12 and 13. She is a member of a group of RE teachers involved in writing a series of secondary texts, *Religion in Focus*. Claire, married to a charismatic pastor, declared that she was quite open about her own Christian allegiance, and regarded her witness as being a role model for her pupils.

Loraine

I was particularly impressed by my conversation with Loraine. Quite early in our discussion, Loraine told me that she had re-entered teaching in mid-career with a distinct sense of divine calling. She had inherited a very rundown department but had made considerable progress, both in terms of resourcing the department and in offering the Short Course GCSE in RE. Loraine initially struggled, both with classroom management and with issues relating her personal faith to multi-faith RE, but has now worked this issue through in her own thinking and is very secure in her personal faith.

Roger

Roger has spent most of his teaching career in East London, working in 'tough' schools in Tower Hamlets before moving to Barking, where he is now RE Advisor for Barking and Dagenham. He has just completed a scheme of work in RE for the schools in his charge and this is much more based on a multi-faith approach than had been the case previously. I found the aims and objectives of a new scheme of work we had researched and produced very interesting, RE should:

- prepare pupils to live securely in a multi-faith and multi-philosophy world
- help pupils to regard religion and religious experience as an important part of their life and outlook
- ensure that the Christian faith is safeguarded as credible, relevant and important in today's world
- enable pupils to be discerning and sympathetic towards religions other than their own, but also to have a deeper understanding of their own religious tradition.

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David has written three books: *The Theory and Practice of Government* (Scripture Union), *Christians and Colour in Britain* (Scripture Union) and *Christians and the Third World* (Paternoster).

He has been awarded three bursaries by the Farmington Institute, the most recent of which enabled him to produce this article.

David served as an ACT Director from 1998–2004.

Sylvia

Sylvia is currently teaching in a Leicestershire Middle School, but previously she taught in an 11–16 Community College with a 90% Asian population. She found the experience of teaching Hinduism and Islam enjoyable and emphasised that it is important for students to learn more about their own religion as well as other world faiths. She volunteered the information that her studies of world faiths have helped her to be more sure of her own Christian faith, as well as enabling her to build meaningful bridges of understanding towards her Asian students. In common with all with whom I spoke or corresponded, Sylvia has always been willing to confess her own Christian faith in and out of the classroom.

Derek

Derek (a Diocesan Adviser for Salisbury) makes the same point regarding 'learning about' other religions. He writes, 'I was clear that I was in the business of Religious Education, not Religious Instruction. (That is what I did on Sundays). I felt that my aim in teaching other faiths was to encourage respect for people of other faiths.' He continues, 'I feel there is much that I, and my pupils, can learn from, say, Islam, eg I am constantly challenged about my attitude to prayer when I study Islam. I think there is much my pupils can gain from reflecting on the way Sikhs stand up for their beliefs, or the way that Jews have maintained their identity in the face of persecution, or the way that Buddhists have thought through issues of suffering and so on.'

Evangelical realists

It would be presumptuous to attempt to draw hard and fast conclusions from such a small sample, but it is significant that all those to whom I spoke had no problems in teaching a multi-faith RE. Indeed, in a number of cases, Christian teachers who would readily call themselves evangelicals, have introduced or increased the multi-faith component in their syllabi. They are realists. They recognise this rapidly changing society in which young people are growing up, and fully appreciate that not to teach world religions would be escapist, if not dishonest.

Some did admit that, initially, they had to struggle with their own commitment to an exclusive Christianity and also to teaching their pupils to respect other religions, but this did not come across as a major issue. They were unanimous, however, in emphasising their personal commitment to Christianity and they were all very

prepared to make their faith known to their pupils. Most were happy to be identified with any pupil-based CU (Christian Union) in the school, but usually in an advisory and counselling role rather than in a position of leadership.

Prayer

It was significant that, with one exception, the teachers I interviewed reported that they did not feel too well-supported by their churches. This point of view was brought into sharp focus in a lecture given to the Association of Christian Teachers at its annual conference in 2001 by George Oliver. George has spent all of his career in education, first in a number of ILEA (Inner London Education Authority) secondary schools and finally as RE Advisor for ILEA. George took early retirement to join CARE as an Education Advisor. Slightly tongue in cheek, he recounted his experiences thus: 'When I was teaching 900 boys a week for Scripture, teaching in the front line, I received no prayer support from my church; when I was advising on RE in 70 schools in a London suburb, a step back from the front line, I still had no regular prayer support; when I became RE Inspector for ILEA, another step back from the front line, there were the beginnings of some prayer backing; then, at last, I left the battlefield altogether and entered the world of 'Christian service' as Education Adviser to CARE and co-founder of Christians in Education, and immediately I was supported as a properly accredited 'Christian Worker' – "Right let's get behind George in serious prayer now that he's well and truly removed from the classroom battlefield." (ACT Now, Spring 2002)

Support


To be fair to our vicars and ministers, they will, quite rightly, point out that not only teachers need the church's prayer support: what about doctors and housewives, accountants and social workers? I know my minister would agree with me that the teachers in our fellowship need prayer, but he would also say, 'David, if I were to comply with every request for a 'special' day for highlighting specific needs, I could fill up most Sundays in the year. What about Suffering Churches Sunday, or

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Burma Sunday, or Prisons' Sunday, etc?' I would say in reply, 'Yes, but don't forget that our teachers are very 'special' because we have entrusted them with the unique task of shaping the next generation and with helping them to work out a code of ethics and moral behaviour that is based on biblical principles. Our teachers will probably do more than any other group of persons to enable young people to live positively in a multi-faith society and, as Christian teachers, to show them that the Christian faith can be totally relevant to them as they grow up into tomorrow's society.' Special, Minister? You bet!

Perhaps Brian's career would not have taken him out of RE teaching if he had been more sure of a supportive church that would have seen him through his dilemma ten years ago. Who knows?

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