Religious Education in a Multi-Faith Society
8th – 10th September, 2006
A residential conference at Cumberland Lodge and St George’s House, Windsor

Conference Summary

In a secular world, is it right/necessary to learn RE? Arguably yes, more so.

RE promotes knowledge of the views of others, but what about the views of secularists? The secular humanist tradition should be included in the RE framework.

**Religion, society and conflict**
Is religious education (RE) about serving secular social purposes, such as creating understanding and tolerance among those of all faiths and none? Is it about promoting one faith, exclusively? Is RE meant to support and strengthen religious belief in general, thus fostering students’ moral and spiritual sensibilities? Or, perhaps it is wrong to say RE has any of these moral or social values; should it be seen only as an academic discipline requiring critical thinking, objectivity and independent thought?

Most religions are, to some degree, demanding of an exclusive allegiance ‘My God is a jealous God’. (other quotes) Religious people are expected to be true to their own faith, perhaps even to proselytise, yet in a pluralist democratic society believers must also live and work with those other faiths without causing conflict. The moral teaching of most religions are noble and good, yet differences in doctrine or religious observance can still lead to hostility. As Jonathan Swift said: ‘We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.’ It is possible to say that tension and conflict between those of different faiths could be avoided by everyone keeping their religion confined to the private sphere, by not being too overt and therefore offensive about religious practises and beliefs. Yet not all those who are religious would agree, for some, the outward expression of religious practises is integral to their faith, however much hostility is generated as a result. Attacks on religious groups may make them stronger, as Sir Thomas Browne observed: ‘Persecution is a bad and indirect way to plant religion.’ In recent times extremists claiming a religious identity for themselves have lent support to the supposition that belief can cause or contribute to conflict.

In a society that some would describe as secular, and others as multi-faith, religious leaders and educators need to acknowledge and respond to the possibility that the overt expression of different religions might lead to violence or terrorism. Should we ignore religion as a dangerous and malign influence in a secular society; should religious education, the requirement for collective worship, and, most of all, ‘faith-schools’ be discontinued? If it is thought that this is neither possible nor desirable, then,
surely, one of the most pressing questions of our age is: how can we foster a society in which religion inspires love, justice and obedience, and does not become a cause of violent conflict?

Arguably, in a secular, multi-faith society Religious Education in schools must reflect a society characterised by a diversity of beliefs and values. Studying religion is not, in essence, the same as the practise of one exclusive religion; religious education is, partly, an attempt to come to terms with those religions in the public sphere, and how belief should be expressed in a secular society. ‘I respect faith, but doubt is what gets you an education’ as Wilson Mizner said. How far and in what way religious education might also be true to the exclusive and demanding nature of particular religions is, however, worth considering. In relation to religious education, how exactly, do we ‘render unto Caesar the things that are Caesars, and to God the things that are God’s’?

**Religious education, society and conflict**

Is excellence in the study of religion a purely academic quality? Certainly, RE can help young people consider what and why people think about religion as they do. In matters of personal conviction it is harder to be objective, so the discipline of RE is an interesting test of academic and intellectual skills. Arguably, it is socially valuable to apply critical thinking to articles of faith, as this dilutes the power of extreme, fanatical beliefs which brook no opposition. Religious education must surely include the right to challenge some things, even if they go under the name of religion.

How far does religious education have a role in promoting tolerance between those of different faiths? Or is tolerance too weak a word, suggesting indifference and lack of interest; do we need rather to have a strong spirit of tolerance in the sense of understanding and empathising with those of different religious positions? The UK government has not prescribed in detail what is taught in RE, but one clear requirement is that it must reflect the fact that RE traditions in the UK are mainly Christian, while also recognising the existence of other faiths. Learning about the different religions may help students to understand the depth and variety of religious traditions and beliefs, which may not be conveyed in Mosques and Churches. Such knowledge may be important in countering those extreme and highly simplistic views of religion which can lead to extremism or intolerance. However while there may be the sharing of cultures and foods, between people of different religious groups, this does not necessarily mean there is a sharing of core values, beliefs and ideas. Still, it may be a start, if there is a basic recognition of the contribution of religions to cultures.

Students can also learn about religion through other disciplines, such as history, literature, geography, although how this actually takes place might need more careful consideration. When religion is seen as part of history and culture there is more chance that students will understand the role of religion in society more broadly, seeing it as a creative, empowering force that gives dignity to individuals and has had significant positive contributions to society at times. This, too, may act as a counter to the
development of the extreme fanaticism that comes from insecurity and lack of confidence.

**Religious schools and violence**

‘Faith’ school are currently being widely debated. It is widely felt that religious teaching in such schools should not be in a dogmatic, bigoted and proselytising way; schools must not promote a narrow view of religion. It has been suggested that there needs to be strict monitoring of schools to make sure they do not promote a narrow view of their own religion only. ‘Education’s purpose is to replace an empty mind with an open one.’ Malcolm S. Forbes However, it is to be questioned (is it?) whether and how having a particular religious identity can also give people a willingness to step outside their own faith group, to embrace people from other backgrounds. How do people of faith be true to their faith, while also having a sense of humanity in general, and a willingness to engage with the bigger picture? How can a religious identity be not too rigid, narrow, and closed to others?

Should faith schools be allowed to continue? Is the social engineering of separate schools in the last few years dangerous? (graphic illustration?) Do faith-schools not compound religious tensions? Can we justify state financed support for C of E and Catholic schools but not for others? Schools should model the sort of society we want to be where all different people live together. Some ‘faith’ schools can be very diverse communities, however there was some debate as to whether schools should be allowed to refuse entry to those of other faiths; currently if Catholic or Cof E schools are oversubscribed they can use religion as selection criteria and turn away others. However inclusion is a *fait accompli*; 30 % of pupils in Catholic schools are already from non-Catholic backgrounds. However it was thought to be particularly a problem if a monofaith school was also of one minority ethnic group. State funded faith schools may be abolished, but it is worth noting that it is not possible to abolish private faith schools, and for these schools it is a lot more difficult to know what is being taught, so it would not seen desirable to encourage their proliferation. People agree that religion won’t go away, but if you remove it from the maintained system you will hand religion over to religious believers.

There was considerable difference of opinion on whether ‘faith’ schools help or hinder in promoting diversity. Some argued that tolerance was taught through the schools capacity to embrace diversity, and this must mean the mixing of theistic and atheistic elements. There was criticism on monochrome faith schools. However does diversity have to lie in the schools population, with Catholics, Anglicans, Muslims all studying together, or does it lie in the nature of what is taught within RE classes? Does a school for one faith only, or mainly, limit the capacity of children to learn about the diversity which exists in broader society? Are faith-schools multi-faith? There was discussion on those from religious minorities, where the visible expression of their religion puts them at odds with broader, seemingly secular society. A strict mono faith school may mean some children grow up cut off from the mainstream of society. On the other hand, a
religious school specifically for those from one faith may help such children be stronger in their faith, and surer of their own identity. Faith schools per se are not necessarily the problem, as all the four London bombers attended integrated comprehensives.

Alternatively, RE may be about promoting certain social aims, such as greater tolerance and understanding of those from different religious backgrounds. Learning about different religions may well reduce the fear that comes from lack of understanding and alien practises.

**Beyond academic excellence**

What is a child? What makes children different from adults? What does it mean to care for the well-being of a child? Does this mean we are only interested in their academic ability, or also their moral and spiritual development? One participant argued that all children are born with faith and belief, she could not understand how the term ‘non-religious’ could be applied to very young children. Arguably, every child has a spiritual instinct. Where does the child’s phrase ‘That’s not fair…’ come from? Where does our sense of morality come from? It is possible to say everyone prays, even if it is a crisis that drives individuals to do so. ‘Where are we going?’ is also a question driven by the spiritual instinct.

At school level it is worth asking what will develop the whole child; is this not more important than learning a body of knowledge? Religious education might help young people develop their identity and sense of belonging. It may be that religious studies has an important and unique contribution to the moral and social development of young people. We would that if given a child by the age of 7 he will be mine for life, results in good Jesuits who are also good people. Arguably religious education may also help young people to identify their religious and moral instincts, to explore these, to consider the source of their instincts and to make their own judgement about the value of those instincts. Or is this going too far for school RE classes to achieve? How can schools foster work with parents and the broader community? Academic excellence versus the wider aims and purposes of education. There was some discussion of the role of ‘collective worship’ and how well this requirement (whose, what?) is fulfilled. Religious education which promotes tolerance may be just as well promoted at times when the whole school community is gathered together, times of collective worship.

Religious education may promote understanding and appreciation of truth, justice, respect and care for the environment. It can’t be just a woolly time; it needs to confront tough issues such as how do you be nice to someone who says ‘your religion should be abolished?’ Only chance we have of getting young people to understand each other is at primary school and if we miss this the consequences are not good. (Keith PW)

But the conference suggested much depends on the imaginative way in which religious studies is taught. The use of stories is both true to the nature of religious teaching in
the Bible itself, and is a powerful way to promote humanitarian understanding, understanding of people themselves. The development of the faculty of imagination is crucial to religious education, and to all education. Without this ability, it is not possible to put ourselves into the shoes of others, of asylum seekers, refugees and so on. The development of the imagination lies at the heart of all education. Yet do we realise this enough, in our emphasis on academic achievement? Other ways in which RE is taught include having representatives from different faith communities to speak at the school, so there is a sense of the depth of importance religious practises hold for different people.

Could the aims of RE actually work to broaden the aims of education more generally, in other subjects? If RE is about more than just academic achievement, how far should the moral and spiritual development of children be recognised and incorporated as an aspect of their education in general? It was said by Lord Carey that a religious education is one that leads to an encounter between the greatest minds and books of our civilisation. The aim of teaching should be to making great minds accessible. If education is seen as being about values, awe and wonder, it is an essential element in human growth. Education is far more than teaching facts. A child is not an empty vase you fill but a fire you light.

**Religion and society**

Today religion is in the private sphere, not linked to politics, therefore people feel insecure. Perhaps government should be a broader patron of the arts. Cultural democracy - if you don’t know the structure you are bound to be insecure; fanaticism comes from lack of confidence.

Religion does not necessarily have to be confirmed to the private sphere for there to be peace and harmony in society. Religious acceptance and understanding did exist at a time when religion was closely linked to art, politics and wealth in imperial cultures. Religion is so often presented in a pure, rigid form, as though different religions exist in a parallel universe to each other. In fact, over history there has been much mixing and cross-fertilisation, at least in terms of artistic forms. Students of the Western tradition find that the path to Paris and Oxford leads through Bagdad. Aristotelian philosophy came to the West via the translation from Greek, but also Arabic. In European history Christianity, Islam and Judaism have shared cultures through points of historical contact. When religions were no longer seen as threats, when they were strong politically, then their artistic forms could be used as inspiration. We need to recognise the benefits religions have brought us, while also understanding what distinguishes religions. Religion is about free inspiration, not fixed identity.

Government control of religious education, imposing quotas to ensure fixed faith schools, demanding a certainly curricula, etc. In the end these will only do so much. What is necessarily is for the individuals responsible for teaching religious education to realise it as a creative, constructive force, and to present it as such. Just as bad
versions of religion are passed on through teachers, priests and Imams, so are good, constructive understandings of religious teaching.