

7.5 A REPORT ON THE SCOPE FOR INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE WITHIN ADVANCED LEVEL SPECIFICATIONS – JOHN SINGH

Aim of the report

This brief report aims to provide the reader with a preliminary understanding of the potential scope within current Advanced Level specifications for initiating inter-faith dialogue within the classroom. Four diverse specifications have been selected, drawn from the broader subject areas of Mathematics, Sciences, Social Sciences and English. Using specific citations, hypothetical approaches have been created to exemplify how inter-faith dialogue can be initiated within that subject area. Where possible, a direct quotation has been taken from the specification.

Recent history: the implementation of the AS and A2 level specifications

Within recent years there has been an increased awareness among teachers of the need to provide opportunities for the expression of spirituality and diverse cultural perspectives within schemes of study. Each specification contains guidance for teachers on how the delivery of *spiritual, moral, ethical, social, cultural and other issues* can be incorporated into the scheme of work.

Although this is a positive move towards recognising and celebrating diversity within the classroom, it fails to provide any specific necessity to facilitate inter-faith dialogue.¹ From my own experience when interacting with teaching staff in both pre and post-16 education, there has been the feeling that the term 'spirituality' is so vague that it is very difficult to address in any concrete manner within any given lesson. More importantly the specification fails to emphasise the need to promote dialogue and interaction from different faith and non-faith perspectives.

The sample chosen

The specifications used here are, for the sake of parity, all taken from the AQA examining board. The subjects chosen are Psychology, Biology, English Literature and Statistics. The reason for such a diverse sample is not only to cover key subject areas but to further demonstrate the very real beneficial subject specific outcomes that can be produced for each area.

Advanced Level Psychology

Psychology touches on a number of major themes throughout the course which may provide opportunity for inter-faith dialogue. Below are hypothetical opportunities identified in both the AS and A2 year of study.

Cognitive Psychology: Memory

The specification requires students to study '*research into reconstructive memory (e.g. Bartlett)*'. The subject matter of the research draws on different cultural (and religious) understandings of the self, death and the nature of human experience. This would provide an opportunity to learn about and discuss issues of understanding human experience within the Native American Indian tradition and European Christian tradition. This would enhance the students understanding of 'schemas' and their influence upon memory.

¹ Here inter-faith refers to dialogue, cooperation and understanding among individuals of faith or no faith.

Developmental Psychology: Attachments

In this section the specification requires students to understand '*research into individual differences in attachment, including secure and insecure attachments (e.g. Ainsworth) and cross-cultural variations*'. The very theme of the unit draws on the nature versus nurture debate. This theme may be elaborated into a dialogue between materialist–biological and religious understandings of the nature of the self/soul. Furthermore students are expected to study '*cross cultural variations*', an area which draws on research conducted in different cultural and religious contexts. This may be used to facilitate discussion about different perspectives on morality and different religious attitudes to childcare provision.

Physiological Psychology: Stress

While studying stress students cover '*Approaches to managing the negative effects of stress, including physiological (e.g. drugs, biofeedback) and psychological methods*'. Meditation is often taught as a psychological stress-management technique. This will provide opportunity to engage in dialogue about the effect of prayer and meditation on health and lifestyle in different traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity (although it can be enlarged to any tradition).

Social Psychology, Research Methods and the Coursework Unit

One common theme throughout the course is the study of ethical guidelines in Psychological research. In each of the above units in the specification students will be given opportunity to study and discuss what is unethical and why it is considered unethical. In the latter case, it is possible to draw out the discussion into a broader dialogue about where students draw their moral and ethical judgements from. Given sufficient preparation, this could also enable inter-faith dialogue within the classroom through perspective taking and sharing firmly held beliefs.

Individual Differences and Abnormality

This topic is studied at both AS and A2 levels. It requires students to think about and define what psychological abnormality is, and later to study specific forms of psychological abnormality such as schizophrenia. In both areas, students can be prompted to recognise that the behaviour of religious figures could have or has been in the past categorised as abnormal. Here dialogue can occur between those who hold a physiological perspective on religious experience and those who hold a religious belief. Furthermore, students may also identify examples of religious figures across different traditions whose behaviour would nowadays be possibly categorised as psychologically abnormal, e.g. Jesus, Prophet Muhammad, Buddha, etc

Advanced Level English Literature

Since what an individual student actually studies from this specification is chosen by the English teacher, it will not be possible to provide as detailed an exploration as has been given for the other subjects. However, clearly within each unit there will be a host of opportunities for inter-faith discussion.

In the AS year, students look at one modern novel, a work of Shakespeare, a piece of drama and a piece of poetry. Clearly within the literature students will be

tackling themes such as life and death, the meaning of human existence, the nature of the self, the role of religious authority in society, conflict between ethnic/religious communities. Within each theme is the opportunity to recognise not only the author's possible perspective, but also what those of faith and no faith would feel on such issues. Furthermore, in A2 year there are options which require of the student some familiarity with the religious ideas of the author to enable understanding of the themes within the texts such as William Blake, William Wordsworth, Seamus Heaney, etc. The consequence of studying and discussing the respective spiritual beliefs presented in the texts equates to greater inter-faith dialogue and understanding.

Advanced Level Biology/Biology (Human)

Within the Biology specification there is much scope for inter-faith dialogue, specifically within the larger debates surrounding science and religion. A number of the potential sources for dialogue are issues that have received much media coverage in recent years. The central issue in these ethical debates remain where the line is to be drawn with gains to scientific knowledge on the one hand and issues of moral and ethical practice on the other. Religious spokespersons have played a major role in critiquing the methods used in these advances in recent years.

In the AS year within *'Making Use of Biology'* module, students look at the role Gene technology can have in the modern world. Clearly this provides opportunity to discuss what different religions have to offer on this issue in light of the recent controversies over the use of foetuses in research and the transplantation of human embryos. The issues raised will prompt the moral perspectives held by the students and arguments will no doubt build upon accepted religious beliefs about the payoff between the sanctity of life and quality of life arguments. Within the same unit, contraceptives are also discussed which again may initiate dialogue about when life begins, pointing to a diversity of opinions and the consequences they have on attitudes to contraception. Both issues serve as starting points with which to engage with and discuss different religious and non-religious perspectives on when life begins, the purpose of scientific research, the rights of the foetus, etc.

In the A2 year, numerous opportunities exist for inter-faith dialogue. In the *Inheritance, Evolution and Ecosystems* module students will be introduced to the evolutionary perspective. This provides scope for more general religious opinions on the evolutionary approach with regards to beliefs about creation. What may arise out of drawing on different religious perspectives on this issue is a greater critical understanding of the theory with articulation of criticisms concerning reductionism and determinism.

Within the same unit students will also study the consequence of human activity on ecosystems. Opportunity here exists to link a diversity of religious beliefs to, for example, the *deep ecology* perspective of Arne Naess² and the inspiration for environmentalists. Examples could be drawn from non-industrialised 'tribal' communities and their attitudes, beliefs about and behaviour toward the environment. Not only would this enable inter-faith dialogue on the issue, but also produce a framework in which all students, of faith and no specific faith, can contribute and learn equally.

Advanced Level Statistics

² See Bill Devall's 'Simple in Means, Rich in Ends' (1990, Green Print) for an introduction to the deep ecological movement.

This perhaps poses the greatest challenge considering the relatively limited scope of the subject to facilitate philosophical or religious discussions. Comparatively the *Spiritual, Moral, Ethical, Social, Cultural and other issues* section within this specification is very limited. It suggests that issues of morality, culture and spirituality can be dealt with only through the teacher's chosen application of a context within which the study of statistics can take place.

As an example for how this may work in practice I have used the area of *correlations* which arises in the first module of the AS year. Akin to the kind of headline grabbing statistics the students will no doubt have come across in the media, students could be given fictitious data for each variable of a correlation structured around religious practice. For example one variable could be religious practice, the other a measure of health. If the correlation is to be a strong positive one, students could then discuss the possible reasons for this, and thus also the weaknesses of the correlation as a statistical tool (for example, the lack of causality). In the process of identifying the weakness of the measure, students would also be given opportunity to think about how different religious practices could possibly affect lifestyle.

In module two of the AS year, students are expected to learn about sampling. Again if the context was the monitoring of religious belief and practice it would raise very interesting discussions about how it is possible to quantify those religious beliefs. Furthermore, in the process students will recognise the advantages and limitations of certain sampling techniques such as *random, matched pairs, and quota* sampling.

In the A2 year students are expected to generate a hypothesis and test it within a real life context. If religious belief were to be used, it could well generate issues of *intra-faith* definition. For example, if the student were wishing to test a statement that may refer to Muslim attitudes, who exactly would make up their sample? Would the student include marginal groups in the sample? What dangers exist in contacting a religious organisation for samples? What potential sources of bias and what confounding variables could there be? In exploring these issues within the class context, again students may find parallels between religious traditions.

Conclusions

A diverse selection of subjects has been reviewed from the key broader subject areas.

- In the subjects surveyed above, all provide opportunities for inter-faith dialogue within the classroom context and the practical examples given represent only a few of many potential opportunities for inter-faith dialogue within the specifications.
- The nature of that dialogue is largely dependent on the specific context given by the teacher, the understanding of the student and the internal diversity within the class.
- The outcome of such dialogue will both promote greater understanding of and celebrate the inherent religious diversity at both a micro- and macro-level; within the classroom, school, local community, present British society and global citizenship arena.

- Such discussion also serves to enrich the student's critical understanding of the issues and concepts being studied, along with developing an ability to provide a real-life application of the issues raised (this seems particularly important in subjects such as Statistics and the Sciences for example).
- To enable increased inter-faith dialogue would require little extra demand on the teacher and her prior preparation beyond having earlier developed a general understanding of different faiths and their internal diversity (something most PGCE courses ensure to a degree)
- With inter-faith development holding no accreditation within specifications, the pressure upon teachers in trying to get through schemes of work on time, the necessity for highly succinct teaching methods to enable the highest grades and the lack of clarity on how the 'spiritual' is to be incorporated into teaching, there exist many obstacles inhibiting inter-faith practice at Advanced Level study.

Recommendations:

- There is a need for greater clarity within the specifications about how teachers are to incorporate the 'spiritual' within lessons and schemes of work.
- There needs to be clear signposting within Advanced Level specifications on opportunities for inter-faith dialogue and also of the positive learning outcomes that arise from such dialogue. Furthermore, that such dialogue can develop valuable critical understanding of fundamental issues within the subject and their implications upon society.

Links

AQA website

www.aqa.org.uk

A Level front page for AQA specifications

www.aqa.org.uk/qual/gceasa.html

A Level Psychology specification

<http://www.aqa.org.uk/qual/pdf/AQA-5181-6181-W-SP-06.pdf>

A Level English specification

<http://www.aqa.org.uk/qual/pdf/AQA-5741-6741-W-SP-06.pdf>

A Level Biology specification

<http://www.aqa.org.uk/qual/pdf/AQA-5411-6411-5413-6413-W-SP-06.pdf>

A Level Statistics specification

<http://www.aqa.org.uk/qual/pdf/AQA-5381-6381-W-SP-06.pdf>

