

FAITH, INTERFAITH, COHESION AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION - JOHN KEAST

Introduction

First we need to clarify our use of terms. There are varying usages of religion, faith, religions, faiths, traditions and cultures, sometimes with deliberate precision but often used interchangeably without much distinction. What we mean by religion is complex. It can be variously defined and shares some characteristics with ideologies, philosophies and world views. A particular religion may be a recognisable form of belief and practice, composed of various phenomena and characteristics that can be described in different ways. Some of these phenomena may be shared with or appear to be like those of another religion. Faith may describe a personal attitude or characteristic such as trust; a faith may describe something that is believed in. Traditions may be historic phenomena that are passed on to succeeding generations; and culture ranges widely from general assumptions and values that shape us to specific forms of those values such as lifestyles including religious ones.

Similarly, there is a range of use of terminology about cohesion. Social cohesion may refer to the general integrated functioning of society; community cohesion may refer to the ways in which a particular community or sub-communities work co-operatively without overt suspicion or hostility. What is common here is the way in which differences, at the least, co-exist without threat or danger but, at best, work together for the common good; this is what we mean by 'cohere'.

Faith cohesion could therefore be seen to describe the way in which the different faiths (or religious traditions) found in a particular area (local, national or global) function in a way which strengthens rather than damages the well-being and unity of a community or society. Since many issues are involved in descriptions of cohesion, faith cohesion is a term that can be widely and variously interpreted. How religious education contributes to faith cohesion is partly dependent upon how the complex issues of religion and cohesion are worked out, but is also partly dependent on the nature of religious education itself.

Religious education

Religious education, by law, is the responsibility of local agreed syllabuses in community, voluntary controlled, and foundation schools not of a religious character, and of faith communities in voluntary aided and foundation schools with a religious character. Local authority syllabuses are themselves required, by law, to reflect the mainly Christian traditions of Britain, whilst taking account of the other principal religions represented in Britain.

In 1944, the Education Act had set up what is often called the Dual System — that is, county schools and denominational schools, in which Religious Instruction (RI) was compulsory but subject to a right of parental withdraw of their children. Religious Worship was also compulsory but subject to withdraw as well. Two broad assumptions were made; first that the RI and the worship would be Christian; and second that withdrawals were to allow alternative provision elsewhere, rather than none at all. The thinking underlying this act was the desire to build a better society, based on commonly held, traditional Christian values, to prevent totalitarianism and fascism from getting a hold. In the reforms of the 1988 Education Reform Act, the dual system was maintained. The National Curriculum was introduced alongside Religious Education (RE) as the Basic curriculum. Note RE not RI! Instruction was replaced by education. The

requirements for Collective worship were made more flexible but not lessened. All Local Authorities had to establish Standing Advisory Councils for RE. Since 1988 more faith schools across a wider variety of faiths have come into existence, which have brought about accusations of inequality and of segregation from some quarters. There has also been a massive growth in qualifications related to RE.

National Framework for Religious Education

From the general requirements for RE described above, much variety has resulted concerning the RE curriculum, its implementation, effectiveness and quality. To help deal with inequalities and disparities, and to provide a benchmark of standards and entitlement for pupils across England as a whole, the National Framework for Religious Education was published in 2004. Whilst it is non-statutory, the Framework is now being implemented through the review of agreed syllabuses, and is influential in the making of programmes of RE in 'faith' schools. One of the most significant things about the development of the National Framework is that it was both the product of, and a means of securing, faith cohesion. The National Framework was the result of the major faith communities coming together in a seminar called by the Secretary of State for Education, and then working together on a steering group to produce the text of the National Framework and agreeing on the nature and purpose of RE in England. All the major faith communities have since signed a statement committing them to its use in faith schools (February 2006). The remainder of this article attempts to show how religious education (as set out in the National Framework for Religious Education) can promote, and be promoted by, faith cohesion, that is, ways in which different faiths (or religions) 'cohere'.

Faith cohesion and religious education

Central here is the question of the relationship between faith and society, religion and culture, culture here being used in its widest sense to mean the assumptions, institutions, practices, values and lifestyles of Britain. The relationship is not single, static or one way, but complex, dynamic and mutual. Among other things, the relationship concerns the connections between religion and a sense of identity, religion and a sense of belonging, religion and a sense of meaning and purpose. Such a relationship can be conformist in nature, with religion being rather socially conservative and acting as a stable cultural influence; or it can be (some would say should be) prophetic in nature, with religion being socially critical and progressive in influence, providing a moral edge to innate self-interest. How religions individually and collectively function within and influence this relationship may be cohesive or divisive. Currently in Britain there is a willingness to work together. RE deals with all these fundamental concepts and issues, or at least aspects of them, for RE provides pupils with the opportunity to learn about and learn from religion. RE is thus inescapably involved in questions of faith cohesion.

What contribution does RE make?

First, RE promotes awareness, knowledge and understanding of the beliefs, practices and expressions that underpin the issues referred to above, and skills to handle them. This is characterised by attainment target 1 (learning about religion). Second, RE includes evaluation, application and relevance of what is learned about religion, and this is characterised by attainment target 2 (learning from religion). RE inevitably raises, therefore, the question of the values and criteria by which matters of religion and faith are selected, taught, learned,

assessed and evaluated. Knowledge and understanding of what? Whose values? What criteria? And where is truth to be found?

In the largely but not totally mono-cultural society of 1944, the values assumptions would have been based on traditional explicitly Judaeo-Christian values, where the syllabus was bible based to avoid ecclesiastical division. Children were taught the basic stories of the Judaeo-Christian tradition that located people in a meta-narrative that gave life a shape and purpose. Where this 'lowest common denominator' approach was insufficient, dissent was accommodated by faith schools and withdrawals, but it was small in size and not very problematic.

In what is now regarded as a 'multicultural' society with a plurality of faiths and much non-faith, study confined to only one or two religions or to knowledge of religions only is no longer possible or desirable, either in a British or global context. So what is now the values base, and how wide is the scope of study? What about the issues concerning the significance of knowledge, such as implied truth claims? How do we handle difference and commonality? What, if any, are the limits to tolerance or the richer concept of respect? A new common denominator is emerging — not one to be characterised as the lowest, but an exciting and fundamental understanding of RE as a rich, deep inter-faith study that encompasses the commonality and difference of the main spiritual heritages of most of humankind. The 'Axial Age'¹ of human history provides the basis for a global religious education across all major faiths and their variations. Such a view of RE does not break faith with the Christian traditions of British history but they are extended to include the essentially human heritage of faith found in the plural traditions of the world, which is practised, articulated and dynamically developing in diverse ways. Such RE would serve the needs of a fractured humanity by being a spiritual basis for a shared citizenship, faith and community cohesion. It is this kind of RE that the non-statutory National Framework for RE is seeking to promote.

The RE curriculum

The National Framework sets out the importance of RE. It goes on to describe RE across curriculum, and lists the learning in various key stage programmes of study, including religions and beliefs, themes and experiences and opportunities. Descriptions of levels of Attainment using the two targets of learning about and learning from religion then follow. The following examples show how this kind of RE contributes to faith cohesion.

- The importance of RE statement explicitly states that RE 'enables pupils to develop respect and sensitivity to others, in particular those whose faiths and beliefs are different from their own'. (p. 7).
- Attitudinal development includes 'being ready to value difference and diversity for the common good'. (p. 13).
- RE contributes to 'promoting racial and inter-faith harmony and respect for all'. (p. 15).

¹ A term coined by Karl Jaspers, a German philosopher, to describe the period between 900 and 200 BCE which saw the emergence of what became seminal ethical and religious teachings and teachers in Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Greek philosophy, with their important consequences for the development of Christianity, Islam and many other forms of belief and practice.

- The programmes of study for all ages of pupils include encounter with people of different faiths and reflecting on their similarities and differences. Themes include 'inter-faith dialogue'. (p. 29).
- Levels of attainment include 'evaluating the importance of religious diversity in a pluralistic society'. (p. 37).

RE in practice

Actual examples of RE in practice substantiate and provide evidence of the contributions of RE to faith cohesion. Here is a selection.

- There are growing numbers of visits by teachers and pupils to places of worship. On one of these visits in Tottenham, one Christian parent asked a Muslim parent, whose young son was demonstrating Muslim prayers to his classmates on a visit to a mosque, whether the boy was praying to the same God as she did. There followed an 'inter-faith dialogue' of a very positive kind.² Although a small example, it indicates the potency of this kind of religious education to contribute to faith cohesion. Another good example of this approach is found in the Sacred Spaces project, part of the Respect for All work in Bradford, described below. Further information on where schools may visit, and how they may make arrangements, can be found in the Places of Worship section of, www.REOnline.org.uk, a growing portal for RE teachers. This approach is currently being actively supported by the Department for Education through its Education outside the Classroom initiative.³
- There are numerous visits to schools by members of different faith communities to enhance understanding. Sometimes visitors are individuals to a class or assembly, and sometimes they may come together to form a panel for pupils to question and discuss. In nearly all cases, learning in RE promotes faith cohesion by removing ignorance and prejudice. Examples are too many to mention, but most SACREs are involved in such activities.
- Many projects exist to promote RE's contribution to faith cohesion. One of the most notable is the project being run by Education Bradford in association with the Professional Council for Religious Education. This is pioneering ways of using the kind of RE described in the National Framework to promote better relations between pupils and communities in Bradford and other areas in the north of England. Among these ways are the use of places of worship, visitors from different faith communities, development of teaching and learning strategies for knowledge and understanding of religions that promote listening, dialogue and respect, through encounter, emails, community research, visits (Sacred Spaces) and drama.⁴
- The existence of inter-faith centres plays an important part. One of the most developed is in Bradford, but another example is the Plymouth

² Source: Verbal account of the RE and school improvement project, Brunel University, courtesy of Lynne Broadbent. A written account of this project is to be found in *Resource*, 27.2 (Spring 2005), p. 14, published by the Professional Council for RE (PCfRE).

³ A synagogoue visit is described in RE Today (Spring 2005), p. 10f, published by RE Today Services, Birmingham.

⁴ For a fuller description of this project see *Resource* 26.2 (Spring 2006), ISSN 0143-2710, published by PCfRE.

Religious and Cultural Resource Centre. Here faith communities provide a place where teachers (and pupils) from local schools can resource their RE through encountering each other in various events, meetings and seminars through meeting and working with representatives of various faith communities. An instance is an evening of Hindu Bhajans.⁵

- Young peoples' faith seminars provide another way for RE to contribute to faith cohesion. In Bradford there is a young people's SACRE that discusses issues of relationships between faiths in the context of school and college in a similar way to the 'adult' SACRE. In Cambridgeshire, a faith forum established by the local adviser has had excellent results in furthering understanding between young people and faith communities.⁶ This is being replicated in other local areas, partly through a project run by the National Association of SACREs, that originated with the Golden Jubilee Faith Forum 2002⁷.
- Communication between young people of different faiths by emails and residential visits are beginning to happen. One of these is between a school in East Sussex and a school in Leicester, though there are many others. One school in England has established contact with a school in Israel and pupils communicate on a number of inter-faith issues. Some of these forms of communication have been stimulated by a project at the University of Warwick called 'Building E-Bridges' by Julia Ipgrave.
- The Council of Europe is about to publish a Guide for schools on the religious dimension of inter-cultural education which will have the purpose of promoting and sustaining the contribution of RE (among other subjects) to greater inter-faith understanding and dialogue across Europe.⁸
- Resources for developing this kind of RE with pupils are beginning to emerge. They include 'Say Hello To' and 'Building E-Bridges: Inter-faith Dialogue by e-mail' published by RE Today Services.⁹

Other factors

RE is not the sole contributor to the promotion of faith cohesion. For example, language and literature deal with the great spiritual, themes of humankind, embodied in stories, drama, poetry and other literary forms. Without them, not only are human beings spiritually impoverished but spiritually dumb. The Arts in general are media and expressions of shared experiences, aspirations, questions and answers.

⁵ Further details may be obtained from Jonathan Marshall, Director of the PRCRC, 3a Watts Rd, St Judes, Plymouth, PL4 8SE, www.plymouth.gov.uk

⁶ Described in *RE Today* (Spring 2005), p. 42f, published RE Today Services, Birmingham.

⁷ See the Inter-Faith Network website for full details of this initiative www.interfaith.org.uk, which also gives information on Connect, a young people's inter-faith dialogue website.

⁸ The author of this article is on the project group, along with Professor Bob Jackson of the University of Warwick. Further information should become available later in 2006.

⁹ RE Today Services, 1020 Bristol Road, Birmingham B29 6LB, www.retoday.org.uk

Citizenship as a subject contains specific curricular requirements that directly prepare young people for life in a diverse society, through the notions of social and moral responsibility, community involvement, and political literacy. These notions however rest on values assumptions that require an ability to know, understand and handle beliefs and practices, including religious ones.

Apart from the curriculum, other school provision has vital roles to play — the values that comprise the school ethos, the life and activities of the school community and how it is experienced, and not least the role played by collective worship, even if honoured in the breach rather than the observance in many places.

However, schools are arguably not the biggest influences on society and the behaviours of its members. The role of home, the role of local community and communities to which young people belong, the role of state itself, the role of media, and globalisation — all these are also vital and powerful forces in shaping a sense of identity, formation of character, values and ideas, and a sense of belonging, all of which are involved in faith and community cohesion. But it is the school that attempts to shape such development, both of young people and of society itself. It cannot do this on its own. Religious education and community cohesion are, like identity and belonging, the responsibility of the individual, school, family and community.

Conclusion

RE has an inescapable role to play in faith cohesion because RE is about faith, religion and society. Good RE prepares pupils to understand the increasingly important influence of religion and religions on societies and events all over the world. Increasing the quality of RE in Britain is now of fundamental importance. However, religion is not just about social conformity and consistency. Many times in history religion has been critical of a human society when that society has developed immoral or unjust tendencies and practices. Many of the great religious figures of history have had harsh words for their contemporary societies and even their religious leaders. Religion and faith provide a conscientious and prophetic role, bringing to human affairs a voice beyond the here and now that may expose a society or community for its injustice and oppression, and seek to change it. Similarly, RE in the curriculum may have a critical role, questioning accepted assumptions of belief and behaviour. RE does have a role in faith cohesion, but not in faith collusion, if such collusion is with vested and sectional interests that deny the common good.