

Religious diversity and inclusive practice

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Introduction

Until perhaps ten to twenty years ago, there was a widespread assumption that religion was increasingly becoming less important for schools in Britain. However, this has not proved to be the case. While there are many people for whom religious belief, practice and experience are not important, there are many for whom these are significant. Furthermore, the numbers for whom religion is personally relevant have been swelled both by immigration, including children born in such families, and by a tendency found in many religions in recent decades for some religious believers to have become more fundamentalist / literalist. In addition, religious matters now seem more evident in the public arena – whether we are talking about the wearing of religious dress (e.g. the burqa) or religious symbols (e.g. a cross), attitudes to gay marriage, the rise of militant atheism or religious terrorism. In education, the situation is complicated by new forms of faith schooling (Chapman et al. 2014, Parker-Jenkins et al. 2014).

This chapter examines such issues from the perspective of teaching assistants and others (e.g. parents, mentors) who work in school classrooms alongside teachers. I start from the belief that the right to hold a particular belief, religious or secular, should be accepted as part of a wider spectrum of rights to equal participation in education, regardless of difference – and this point applies to teaching assistants and teachers as well as to students. So, I am not making any assumptions about the religious beliefs of you, the reader.

Inclusive schools welcome the diversity represented by members of their neighborhood communities and regard differences as sources for enriching teaching and learning and for fostering harmonious, respectful relationships and mutual understanding (e.g. Mirza and Meeto 2012). However, there are times when such well-intended sentiments are easier to state than to put into practice! A general point is that it is not appropriate for teaching assistants, teachers and other adults in school to attempt to convert students to or away from any particular religion.

One way of thinking of religion is to see it as a part of culture. In one sense there is nothing specific to religion for a school dealing with issues of inclusion. By way of analogy (though analogies are always risky as some people treat them too literally), having a religious faith is in certain respects analogous to being a vegetarian. Some vegetarians believe passionately in the importance of vegetarianism and argue strongly that for anyone to eat meat is wrong; other vegetarians, while equally passionate about not eating meat themselves, believe strongly in the right of others to eat meat if they so choose; still other vegetarians are more laid back about their own eating habits and not averse

sometimes to eating fish. In other words, vegetarians vary in their views about vegetarianism and religious people vary in their views about religion. What we want a school to do is to be respectful of the diversity of religious views within it, without giving the impression that discussion about religion is off limits.

The historical context in the UK

Until the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988, religious education was the only subject that schools in England and Wales were required to teach. This requirement dates back to the 1870 Elementary Education Act which stipulated that 'No religious catechism or religious formulary which is distinctive of any particular denomination shall be taught in the school' (Section 14). At that time, the assumption was that the education would be Christian (hence 'denomination' rather than 'religion') but thus began the long tradition in England that religious education was not to be a nurturing in the state religion (Barnes et al. 2012).

This contrasts with the situation in most countries where state schools often promote the official or majority state religion, though there are countries, notably France, Turkey and the USA, where no religious education takes place in state schools. Also included in the 1870 Act was the right, which persists to this day, of parents to remove their children from religious instruction (as the subject was then called).

The legal situation concerning religious education and such things as collective worship in schools is quite complicated and fast moving; there are important differences among the four UK nations and among the various types of school. In particular, the law does now allow for certain state schools with a religious character to favour one religion over others. Nevertheless, the key features of a religious education in state schools – that it is a core part of the curriculum, has provision for student withdrawal, must be part of a broad and balanced curriculum and must have regard to community cohesion – means that the position of religious education in UK schools is often held to be a much healthier one than in many other countries. This is despite quite frequent calls that religious education be either abolished or made optional, perhaps to be replaced by lessons in philosophy, in citizenship or in personal, social and health education.

The importance of religion to people

For people for whom religion is important, it can be important in two main ways: for belief and for practice. In addition, people often report religious experiences whether these are once in a lifetime ones (e.g. a religious conversion) or more frequent ones (e.g. daily prayer). World-wide, religion remains of significance to many people, including young people; a survey undertaken in 2011 in 24 countries found that 73% of respondents under the age of 35 (94% in primarily Muslim countries and 66% in Christian majority countries) said that they had a

religion / faith and that it was important to their lives (Ipsos MORI 2011; see also Smyth et al. 2013).

For some people, their religious faith is absolutely the core of their being: they could no more feel comfortable acting or thinking in a way that conflicted with their religious values than they could feel comfortable not eating. One way of expressing this is to say that for such people their worldview is a religious one; another way is to say that religion plays a central part in their identity. Of course, for other people, religious faith is either an irrelevancy – an historical anachronism – or positively harmful with many of the ills that befall humankind being placed at its door (Halstead and Reiss 2003).

It can be difficult for those who have never had a religious faith, or have only had one rather tenuously, to imagine what a life is like that is lived wholly within a religious ordering. For teaching assistants and others who work in school classrooms alongside teachers, the skill is to be open-minded about the importance of religion for each student. Of course there can be external markers of religion – for example, a Jewish skullcap (kippah in Hebrew; yarmulke in Yiddish) – but these are only worn by Orthodox males. Similarly, it can be a mistake to conclude too much because a female wears a hijab or someone wears a cross. These often indicate Islam and Christianity respectively but crosses, in particular, can be worn by those with of no religious persuasion. The safest, most respectful and helpful way forward is to try to keep in mind that religion may or may not be important for any student and to listen to what, if anything, they say to you about themselves. Classroom assistants often find that children and young people want to chat to them informally about things which they might not feel able to talk to a teacher about, or bring up in front of the class, and ‘listening’ in these circumstances can be an important part of their role. However, we shouldn't interrogate students about their religious beliefs, practices or experiences but nor should we avoid talking with them about these if they seem to want to.

Of course, having a secular or atheistic approach to life can be as important for some people as having a religious approach to life is for others. John White and I have argued that atheism should be studied in schools (Reiss and White 2009). Young people may well find themselves reflecting on the existence of God, especially when confronted by the debates about belief and religious practice which have assumed such importance nationally and globally. This points to discussing the standard arguments for and against the existence of God and such questions as the possibility of life after death. Students also need to discuss whether human lives can have any meaning outside of a religious framework and whether people can live a morally good life that is not dependent on religious belief.

The particular place of religious education lessons

The aims and content of religious education lessons have varied far more in recent decades than has been the case for many other subjects. When I think back to my own schooling in the 1960s and 1970s, my religious education was terrible. We were fed a watered-down, bible-based and historical account of Christianity. With hindsight I think there was a vague hope that this might make us better people though what we were offered seems more likely to put one off religion than attract or inspire one. Scripture, as it was called, was the one subject that I once managed to come bottom in in any school test or examination, 27th out of 27.

The idea of confessional religious education – i.e. that teaching the subject might lead to the development or strengthening of religious faith – was pretty much abandoned in the 1970s, largely as a result of the publication by School Council (1971) of Working Paper 36: Religious Education in Secondary Schools. Two main arguments against confessional religion were advanced: first, that confessional education entails indoctrination; secondly that confessional education is inappropriate within an increasingly secular and pluralist society. The first argument has been controversial and there are those who continue to maintain that a confessional religion need not entail indoctrination, indeed that to abandon confessionalism is to submit to a form of liberal indoctrination that makes the implicit assumption that fostering any religious belief is educationally indefensible.

The second argument is widely accepted (Barnes 2012). It is generally agreed that school religious education needs to take account of life in a diverse society where Christianity is much less central than it once was both because of a large increase in the number of people with no religious faith and because of increasing numbers of adherents of other faiths. Religious education responded in a number of ways. Particularly popular was a ‘world religions’ approach. The expectation was that at the least students during their schooling would study what are often referred to as the six ‘world religions’ of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. Furthermore, the influential Qualifications and Curriculum Authority Non-Statutory National Framework recommended the study of further traditions ‘such as the Bahá’í faith, Jainism and Zoroastrianism ... and secular philosophies such as humanism’ (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 2004: 12).

Although well-meaning, this multi-faith approach ran into a number of difficulties. For a start, studying so many religions rarely inspired students, leading instead to shallow learning of miscellaneous facts (the five pillars of Islam, the five, eight or ten precepts of Buddhism, etc). Other objections were that such teaching failed to connect to students’ needs, gave a false impression of religion by denying diversity within religions, created a divide between how religion is experienced by those for whom it is important and how it is presented in the classroom, failed to engage students critically with claims about religious truth and underplayed the historical and contemporary importance of Christianity in British society (Watson 2012).

More recent curricula have reduced the number of religions that are studied, placing more emphasis on those that are relevant to the students in a school and in the local communities from which they come. An additional feature of successful religious education curricula is that they contain a substantial amount of material on values and ethics. While ethics can be taught in many subjects, teachers of religious education often have particular expertise in this area. At a time when much of the school curriculum is often criticised for being fact-heavy, good teaching about ethics can be both popular and educationally valuable. It can introduce students to ways in which fundamental questions about human meaning and existence have been addressed while giving student considerable autonomy to develop their own thinking. There are, for example, no single, universally agreed 'right answers' to such questions as whether abortion is permissible, whether we have duties to the environment and if/when war is morally right.

Teaching assistants and others who work in school classrooms alongside teachers can therefore play an important role in helping students to talk about what they believe, think and do. Many students benefit when working in small groups from having an adult with them to help ensure that everyone gets a chance to speak and that certain views are not ridiculed. The skill as an adult is to do this only when necessary, otherwise one can easily end up dominating the conversation.

School-wide issues

There are many issues to do with religion and inclusion aside from religious education lessons. For a start, it remains the case, for community schools in England and Wales, that the law states that a collective act of worship must take place daily and be wholly or mainly of a Christian character. This is a requirement far more honoured in the breach than in the observance. In their efforts not to offend students and to provide for assemblies that 'work' in school terms, few secondary schools other than faith schools nowadays provide true collective worship.

More generally, the task of a school, whether of a religious nature or not, includes affirming in its ethos the value of diversity. This seems to me a key point in respect of the place of religion in a pluralist society. It is increasingly acknowledged that one cannot prove or disprove the validity or worth of religious faith. Given that both religious faith and atheism / secularism / agnosticism are widely represented in society, it is important that schools help students of all persuasions to live and work together respectively both now in school and in the future beyond school (cf. Starkey 2015).

This is not to imply that schools should accept every view about religion. Schools have a role to play in tackling extremism, including religious extremism. Savage (2013) has shown how education can help people to be less polarised in their thinking. It can make people less likely to see things as 'black or white', instead helping them to appreciate that there can be many sides to an argument.

Importantly, being less likely to see controversial matters as straightforward and clear cut is associated with less advocacy of violence. Extremist ideologies, whether religious or not, avoid complexity.

More generally, teaching assistants and others, both by what they say and by their actions, can play a major role in helping students to be tolerant and respectful of difference, including religious difference. Much of this can be done by encouraging students to talk about their actions and their views, thus helping to develop students' reasoning and their ownership of learning (Bosanquet et al. 2015).

Teaching assistants, parents, dinner ladies, midday supervisors and adult helpers often witness instances of bullying, whether in classrooms, in the playground, at mealtimes and on other occasions. Every school should have a policy on bullying, whether this is verbal bullying, physical bullying, relational bullying (excluding a fellow student from activities) or cyberbullying. Bullying in relation to religion should be dealt with as with any other type of bullying. The first thing to do is to stop the bullying and calmly to make it clear to all who have witnessed the bullying that it is not acceptable, and to do so, if possible, in a way that is respectful both of the bully and the one who is bullied. The second thing is to report the bullying to a teacher or some other designated adult in the school.

Teaching assistants and others can be an important link between the school and the wider community. By drawing in, and going out to, the local community and working with local organisations (including faith groups) schools can develop their inclusive cultures in terms of sharing, accepting, celebrating and understanding (Armstrong and Barton 2010). Developing these kinds of relationships with parents of school students and with the wider community can take time and effort but prove to be mutually rewarding.

Science education

One place within schools where religion not infrequently rears its head outside of religious education lessons is in science. Issues to do with religion seem increasingly to be of importance in science lessons. To many science teachers and others involved in science even raising the possibility that religion might be considered within school science lessons raises suspicions that this is an attempt to find a way of smuggling religion into the science classroom for religious rather than scientific reasons. This is not the intention here! Considering the scope of religion (or art or music or ethics) in a science lesson can be, on occasions, useful simply for helping learners better understand why science has things to say about certain matters but not others (Reiss 2014).

Another argument for considering religion within science lessons is like the argument for considering history in science lessons. While science can be learnt and studied in an historical vacuum, there are a number of reasons for examining science in its historical contexts. For a start, this helps students understand better why certain scientific advances were made at certain times. Wars, for

instance, have sometimes led to advances in chemistry, physics and information science (e.g. explosives, missile trajectories, code breaking), while certain botanical disciplines, such as the classification and naming of plants, have flourished during periods of colonisation. Then it is the case that many learners find it motivating to learn science in its historical context.

Similarly, while many students enjoy learning about the pure science of genetics and evolution, otherwise are motivated and come to understand the science better if they know something of the diversity of religious beliefs held by such important scientists as Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley and Gregor Mendel. Such teaching is even better if students come to appreciate the religious views (including the diversity of religious views) of the cultures in which such scientists lived and worked.

There are a number of places where religion and science interact. Consider, first, the question of 'authority' and the scriptures as a source of authority. To the great majority of religious believers, the scriptures of their religion (the Tanakh, the Christian bible, the Qur'an, the Vedas, including the Upanishads, the Guru Granth Sahib, the various collections in Buddhism, etc.) have authority by very virtue of being scripture. This is completely different from the authority of science. Newton's Principia and Darwin's On the Origin of Species are wonderful books but they do not have any permanence other than that which derives from their success in explaining the material world. Indeed, as is well known, Darwin knew almost nothing of the mechanism of inheritance despite the whole of his argument relying on inheritance, so parts of The Origin were completely out of date over a hundred years ago.

Then consider the possibility of miracles, where the word is used not in its everyday sense (and the sense in which it is sometimes used in the Christian scriptures), namely 'remarkable', 'completely unexpected' or 'wonderful' (as in the tabloid heading 'My miracle baby'), but in its narrower meaning of 'contrary to the laws of nature'. Scientists who do not accept that miracles take place can react to this 'contrary to the laws of nature' definition of miracles in one of three ways: (i) miracles are impossible (because they are contrary to the laws of nature); (ii) miracles are outside of science (because they are contrary to the laws of nature); (iii) miracles are very rare events that haven't yet been incorporated within the body of science but will be (as rare meteorological events, e.g. eclipses, and mysterious creatures, e.g. farm animals with two heads or seven legs, have been).

The relationship between science and religion has changed over the years (Brooke 1991, Al-Hayani 2005); indeed, the use of the singular, 'relationship', risks giving the impression that there is only one way in which the two relate. Nevertheless, there are two key issues: one is to do with understandings of reality; the other to do with evidence and authority. Although it is always difficult to generalise, most religions hold that reality consists of more than the dependable, material world that science studies and many religions give weight to personal and/or (depending on the religion) institutional authority in a way that science generally strives not to.

For example, there is a very large religious and theological literature on the world to come, i.e. life after death, (e.g. Hick 1976/1985). However, although some people (notably Atkins 2011) have argued that science disproves the existence of life after death, it can be argued that science has little or nothing to say about this question because life after death exists or would exist outside of or beyond the realm to which science relates.

Sex education

Most of the world's religions have a great deal to say about sexual values. Of course, those with a religious faith also need to understand something of secular reasoning about sexual ethics: it is still too often the case that those with a religious faith assume that only they really know what sexual behaviours are morally acceptable.

In recent years there has been an increasing acknowledgement from all sex educators, whether or not they themselves are members of any particular religious faith, that religious points of view needs to be taken into account, if only because a significant number of children and their parents have moral values strongly influenced by religious traditions.

The first major attempt in the UK among believers from a number of religious traditions to agree a religious perspective on sex education resulted in an agreed statement by members of six major UK religions (Islamic Academy 1991). This statement examined contemporary sex education, listed principles which it was felt ought to govern sex education and provided a moral framework for sex education. This framework 'Enjoins chastity and virginity before marriage and faithfulness and loyalty within marriage and prohibits extramarital sex and homosexual acts', 'Upholds the responsibilities and values of parenthood', 'Acknowledges that we owe a duty of respect and obedience to parents and have a responsibility to care for them in their old age and infirmity' and 'Affirms that the married relationship involves respect and love' (Islamic Academy 1991: 8).

Another early UK project to look at the important of religion and ethnicity for sex education was the Sex Education Forum's 'religion and ethnicity project'. A working group was set up which 'was concerned to challenge the view that religions offer only negative messages around sex, wanting to explore the broader philosophy and rationale behind specific religious prescriptions' (Thomson 1993: 2). Each participant was sent a total of 28 questions (e.g. 'Are there different natural roles for men and women, if so why?' and 'What is the religious attitude towards contraception and/or 'protection' for example, safe sex re: STDs, HIV?') and the project chose to present a range of views, rather than attempting to reach a consensus. The outcome was a pack that had chapters on Anglican, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, Methodist, Roman Catholic, secular and Sikh perspectives.

At the same time as Rachel Thomson was compiling her pack, Gill Lenderyou and Mary Porter of the Family Planning Association were putting together a booklet arising from the 'Values, faith and sex education' project (Lenderyou and Porter 1994). At a four-day residential event in this project, a bill of pupils' rights was drawn up by 22 people of different religious faiths, and agreed statements on sex education were produced under the headings of: Respect and difference, Faith and change in society, Male and female equality, Relationships and marriages, Homosexuality, Cohabitation, Disability and sexuality, and Celibacy. The bill of pupils' rights is more liberal and the agreed statements are more tentative than the contents of Islamic Academy (1991). For example, included in the bill of pupils' rights are the statements that pupils have the right to sex education that 'Provides full, accurate and objective information about growth and reproduction on topics including puberty, parenthood, contraception, child care and responsible parenthood' and that pupils have the right 'To be consulted about the manner in which sex education is implemented in the classroom in connection with issues such as whether it takes place in single sex or mixed groups or which topics can be included in the programme' (Lenderyou and Porter 1994: 37).

Subsequently, Shaikh Abdul Mabud and I edited an academic book titled Sex Education and Religion which concentrated on Christian and Muslim views about sex education (Reiss and Mabud 1998), and publications have resulted from projects funded by the Department of Health's former Teenage Pregnancy Unit including 'Supporting the Development of SRE [sex and relationships education] within a Religious and Faith Context' (Blake and Katrak 2002). Since that time, an increasing of publications have considered the importance of religion for sex education (e.g. Rasmussen 2010, Smerecnik et al. 2010, Yip and Page 2013).

Conclusions

Schools are diverse communities yet UK schools have mostly been slow to consider religion as an inclusion issue. Done poorly, which it all too often is (Ofsted 2013), education about religion can bore students and achieve little. Done well – and not just through formal religious education lessons but in other subjects and in the life and ethos of the whole school – it can engage students, build knowledge, sharpen ethical thinking, contribute to community cohesion (Hess 2009, Woodward 2012) and make religious extremism less likely (Savage 2013).

However, this isn't always easy! For one thing, teaching assistants and others (e.g. parents, mentors) who work in school classrooms may find themselves holding very different views about the importance, relevance and messages of religion to those held by the students. There are various ways of dealing with this – schools typically have policies about such matters as religious dress and time for prayers. It is also important not to equate cultural practices concerning arranged marriages or female genital mutilation with religious positions. More generally, religion can be thought of as a controversial issue, namely as one where a range of positions may validly be held. In most instances the cardinal

rule is for teachers, teaching assistants and others who work in school classrooms to respect students – and vice versa – even if they don't agree with them. As students grow older, they can benefit from adults who disagree with them talking with them, helping them to think of the implications of their views, so long as this is always done in a non-confrontational manner that doesn't appear to attack religion and doesn't abuse the authority that adults in schools almost inevitably have over students.

Reflection on values and practice

Is it realistic to expect teaching assistants to develop relationships with adults and others in the community beyond the school gate?

How might you support a student who felt that their views on sex and relationships were being ridiculed by their classmates on account of their religious beliefs?

What might you do if a student with whom you were working felt that their views about religion were not being taken seriously by their teacher?

Suggestions for further reading

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