

---

**Brian Gates**

## **A soul for Europe – Experience and future Perspectives from England**

Brian Gates gibt einen konzentrierten Überblick über die Situation und die Entwicklung des Religionsunterrichts in England. Er referiert Hauptpunkte der Kritik an seiner überkonfessionellen Ausrichtung – Vergleichgültigung der Wahrheitsfrage, problematische Außensicht auf die Religionen, naiver Liberalismus, bis dahin, dass er gelegentlich mitverantwortlich gemacht wird für die Londoner Anschläge vom Juli 2005.

Er zeigt demgegenüber, dass die Probleme gerade dort auftauchen, wo fundierter Religionsunterricht mit interreligiöser Perspektive fehlt und die vielfältigen Erfahrungen, die man mit einem qualifizierten Religionsunterricht in interreligiöser Perspektive gemacht hat, aus zumeist strukturellen Gründen, Schwächen in der Lehrerbildung und fehlenden öffentlichen Investitionen in diesem Feld nicht genutzt werden.

Er kann Beispiele und Entwicklungen zeigen, dass dort, wo Begegnung und Kooperation integraler Bestandteil der Schulentwicklung sind, Lösungen für Problemfragen (etwa hinsichtlich der Sensibilitäten muslimischer Familien gegenüber einem zu liberalen zwischen-geschlechtlichen Umgang in Schulen) gefunden wurden. Er belegt des weiteren, wie die Anwesenheit von Studierenden aus verschiedenen Religionen in der Lehrerbildung und auch in der Lehrerschaft bereits zu einem neuen Klima integrativer Arbeit geführt hat.

### **A jaundiced view of the RE tradition**

It has become quite commonplace to suggest that an approach to RE which has been influential in the UK since the 1970s has been misleading. Judgements are passed to the effect that the approach has been conceptually flawed in the following ways: It is

- predicated on the assumption that all religions are equally true and sharing a common experiential core
- preoccupied with external manifestations with no regard to their animating beliefs
- replacing a care for the authentic Christian gospel with a naïve liberalism that stupefies scholarly engagement.

To this can be added a further condemnation since July 2005. Not only has the RE approach in England been misleading, it has manifestly failed since from its own heartlands have come native born bombers. The young Muslim men who schemed and plotted explosions on the London underground expose beyond all reasonable doubt the failure of an open RE.

### **A more clinical eye on the same landscape**

It may well be true that there are individual scholars and teachers who do regard all religions as equally true - or false – but it is scarcely credible to charge leading protagonists of the importance of world religions in education with that conviction. This view cannot be fairly attributed to the likes of Ninian Smart, Eric Sharpe, Geoffrey Parrinder, John Hinnells, Richard Gombrich, who provided much of the academic leadership and momentum for the influential Shap Working Party which spearheaded the approach.

Take Smart. No-one who has engaged at all directly with the range and depth of Smart's writings – aesthetic, comparativist, educational, historical, philosophical, religious and theological – could think otherwise. Nor can it be fairly said of the professional team which led by Smart pioneered the applications of this thinking to the primary and secondary school curriculum. John Shepherd makes this powerfully plain in his comprehensive collation of the Smart archive and selection of texts (Shepherd 2006, 2007).

It may be true that for some teachers preoccupation with the outward forms of buildings, festivals and sacred books has been a substitute for real engagement with what moves men and women to design and build as they did and do, to celebrate a Dussehra, Yom Kippur, or an Easter morning and even to think that in scripture lies the whole meaning of life. But if that happens it says more about what is missing from the understanding of those teachers, than it does about the approach itself.

It may even be true that liberal sentiments are to be detected amongst at least some of those who enthuse about RE, but, so soon as they are face to face with the evidences of religion on the ground internationally, its reality kills off any risk of naivete.

It is judgements such as these which lack serious substance. And yet what of the challenge presented by young men who have bombed though attending schools which were set within this RE context. Surely, this exposes the real failings of the approach?

In theory, that might seem likely. In practice, it proves the opposite. True all the schools attended by the London bombers were operating within an official local authority agreed syllabus regime which gave attention to the principal religions of the UK. However, closer inspection reveals that in each of the three schools involved, at the time the boys were pupils there, the RE provision had been judged in public reports by external inspectors to have been very poor (REC 2005). Herein, lies the more likely contributory factor. They were never individually challenged whilst at school to engage their critical intelligence with their faith. And no less significantly their non-Muslim peers were never prompted to understand the wisdom and beauty of Islam. Instead of being mutually enriched by RE, they were left impoverished.

Herein lies the real grounds for legitimate disappointment with RE in England. In theory, it has so much more integrity and intellectual clout than its loudest critics have

recognised. This is also true with the practice. For where the approach based on mutual understanding and challenge of world religions is properly staffed and resourced, pupils find it intellectually stimulating and personally rewarding (Gates 2007). It is the absence of those conditions, which continues to be a reality in many schools, which is at the root of the continuing weakness faced by RE. This predicament is not of its own making, but thrust upon it.

### **A restatement of the 'English approach' to RE**

England still has an established Church. This relationship is noticeable in words on coins, bishops in the parliamentary House of Lords, and in the main timings of public holidays.

However, this provides no justification for any claim that England is fairly described as a Christian nation. Its media, popular culture and working routines are evidently secularised. At the same time, its religious diversity, though proportionally small in terms of total population (the 2001 Census suggests around 7%), is increasing in size and widely acknowledged as an intrinsic part of national identity.

The development of the RE tradition reflects this general context. Diversity of beliefs were acknowledged from the beginning of publicly funded education in 1870 and were expressly addressed in locally agreed syllabuses which became a legal requirement in 1944. The differences being bridged in this provision were principally between the different Christian denominations, but in the 1988 Education Reform Act they were acknowledged as extending also to other principal religious traditions of the UK, namely Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs. Thereafter, it became illegal for any syllabus agreed for local authority schools to ignore this plurality in the curriculum which it commended for primary or secondary pupils.

More recently, a non-statutory National Framework for RE (QCA 2004) has been developed with the agreement across the full range professional RE associations, the churches, the other faith communities and the British Humanist Association. It provides a vision judged as appropriate for those responsible for RE in publicly funded schools in England to work towards, including those which are denominationally linked – as Anglican, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Muslim or Sikh. It is more 'process' than content driven, and it includes a succession of indicative levels of understanding from 3-16 years. It accepts the principle that every student has an educational entitlement to become not just literate and numerate, but also 'religiate'.

Religious Education provokes challenging questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, beliefs about God, the self and the nature of reality, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human. It develops pupils' knowledge and understanding of Christianity, other principal religions, other religious traditions and other world views that offer answers to questions such as these. It offers opportunities for personal reflection and spiritual development. It enhances pupils' awareness and understanding of religions and beliefs, teachings, practices and forms of expression, as well as of the influence of religion on individuals, families, communities and cultures.

Religious Education encourages pupils to learn from different religions, beliefs, values and traditions while exploring their own beliefs and questions of meaning. It challenges pupils to reflect on, consider, analyse, interpret and evaluate issues of truth, belief, faith and ethics and to communicate their responses.

Religious Education encourages pupils to develop their sense of identity and belonging. It enables them to flourish individually within their communities and as citizens in a pluralistic society and global community. Religious Education has an important role in preparing pupils for adult life, employment and lifelong learning. It enables pupils to develop respect for and sensitivity to others, in particular those whose faiths and beliefs are different from their own. It promotes discernment and enables pupils to combat prejudice. (page 7)

As part of these agreements, it is now in evidence that the established church tradition is capable of being extended as a collective umbrella to include the diversity of faiths as found within a country which is best described as Christian and Secular and Multi-faith. The monarchy is apparently well disposed to the notion that *Fidei Defensor* should not be interpreted exclusively as referring only to one particular denomination within a faith or indeed to only one faith. Neither of these facts should be seen as signs of indifference to the distinctive claims to truth of Christianity generally or more specifically of the Anglican church within it. That foundation, in its threefold prizing of Biblical roots, of cumulative Christian tradition and of the light of reason lies its capacity for firm convictions and warm openness to those who believe differently.

### **Isn't this just words?**

Such a vision is yet far from reality. Though excellent resources abound, along with the increasing popularity of the subject, there is still patchiness on the ground in the specialist competence and confidence of teachers. There is no doubt that inattention to genuine understanding of religions and of Islam in particular in some schools has contributed to the present distress in which mutual suspicions abound.

Even now, however, and staying focussed on Islam, the position which already exists in English education for those from a Muslim background is more positive than is the case in many other parts of Europe:

- Most Muslim boys and girls are educated within state schools: Community schools, Church schools, and the as yet small number of maintained Muslim schools.
- Within these state schools, the governors and headteachers are aware of Muslim sensitivities about clothing, food, sex education, and preference where possible for single sex secondary schooling. Thus, typically hallal food will be available in schools with large numbers of Muslim pupils, the hijab will be permitted, boys and girls will be separated for physical education and swimming.
- Increasingly more and more Muslim students (but far more women than men) are training as teachers – and being employed as such in both primary and secondary schools. Many are employed in schools whose demographic context is multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-faith, but increasingly some in less diverse school environments.

- These teachers who are Muslims, with or without the hijab, teach the full National Curriculum as required in all state funded schools; they also usually teach RE (though they have the right in law to opt out) – and that means not only teaching Islam, but other religions as well. There are Muslims who are now in charge of Religious Education in their schools, and they are helping boys and girls to understand Christianity and the other principal religions of the UK as well as Islam.

Yet so much more needs to be done, not only with Islam in mind or the interests of social cohesion, but to give every boy and girl fertile companionship within their school experience for enriching and testing the beliefs and values by which they will live their future lives. For this reason the RE Council of England and Wales, with government support, is preparing a National Strategy for RE, which will strengthen teacher education and training and the work of the Standing Advisory Councils for RE (SACREs) which exist in every one of the 150 Local Authorities. The scale of the further education and support needed for teachers, who are already working in primary and secondary schools, is itself considerable, but it reflects the enormous shifts in human consciousness which can no more be ignored than the impact of global warming or communications technology. All together they are part of the great challenge of human meaning.

## References

Gates, B. E. (2007) *Transforming Religious Education: beliefs and values under scrutiny* London, Continuum.

National Statistics (2001) *Census*. Available to download from:  
<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=293>

QCA (2004) and DfES (Department for Education and Skills) *Religious Education. The non-statutory national framework* London Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. Available to download from: <http://www.qca.org.uk/9817.html>

Religious Education Council of England & Wales (2005) *Campaign against Terrorism*. Available on line at: [religionseducationcouncil.org](http://religionseducationcouncil.org)

Shepherd, J. (2006) 'The Ninian Smart Archive and Bibliography' in *Religion* 35, pp. 167-97.

Shepherd, J. (Ed) (2007) *Ninian Smart on World Religions* Aldershot, Ashgate