

An exploration of the relationship between Religious Education teachers' understandings of religiously inspired violence and their practice in the classroom- outline of a preliminary paper

Andrea Haith (Canterbury Christ Church University)

Introduction

This paper represents an outline of my initial ideas about the teaching of religiously inspired violence in UK schools and the development of a pedagogy which will empower students to strive for equality. I have used the term 'religiously inspired violence' rather than 'terrorism' or 'extremism' as these terms usually resonate with the media portrayal of Islam. Equally, I am uncomfortable with the concept of 'religiously' inspired violence as this equates with ideas of absolutism, divisiveness and irrationality and to this extent it is a Western invention (Cavanaugh, 2009). Secular ideologies can be just as prone to acts of violence but these are justified as a rational means to peacekeeping.

The RE Curriculum in England

The Education Reform Act 1988 provides the legal context for the practice of Religious Education in England. The Act stipulates some of the content of Locally Agreed Syllabi. It also grants specific discretionary rights for Standing Advisory Councils for RE (SACRE's). Further recommendations re the content of the RE syllabus is provided by QCA (2004). To this extent RE provision in England is complex (Conroy et al 2013, p59) and inconsistent.

There is no specific legislation which states that the topic of religiously inspired violence has to be taught to students in UK secondary schools. However, a number of recent reviews of the RE curriculum have emphasised that RE is a significant medium in which to do this (REC, 2013: p.14).

The Issues

Religious Education at GCSE level incorporates a myriad of topics. Critics have suggested that reliance on examination-focused learning outcomes, examination-board approved materials and the content and the aims of the examined curriculum in setting the agenda for RE has distorted learning (see Strhan, 2010; Conroy et al, 2013). There appears to be little emphasis on the complex, rich and troubling histories and myths at the heart of religious traditions and thus we are presented with a distorted image of what being 'religious' means (Strhan, 2010).

Moulin, in a study of the experiences of secondary school students from religious backgrounds in RE lessons, found that they felt that their tradition (the study involved students from four religious communities, one Jewish and three Christian) was stereotyped and simplified without acknowledging the diversity within it or noting the complex relationship between individual adherents and their own tradition. (Moulin, 2010).

The topic of religiously inspired violence raises a number of difficulties for RE teachers in publically funded schools. The primary focus in my research will be on Islam because it is at the centre of public and political discourse in relation to religious extremism and terrorism (Miller, 2013). The issues raised, however, can be applied to all forms of religiously inspired violence.

Since September 11 2001 there has been a drive to promote positive relationships between religious groups. Recent international events and the reporting of them has done little to cultivate empathy towards Islam. This further compounds the difficulties for RE teachers.

Hitherto, specific guidance on how to teach contentious issues has been guided by a number of initiatives imposed by successive Governments. The *Contest* and its subsequent *Prevent* strategy established in 2008, was conceived in an attempt to seek to establish relationships with community partners as a way of ‘stopping people becoming or supporting terrorists and violent extremism’ (Home Office, 2008) (Revell, 2012).

In 2011, *Prevent* was rewritten as the Government wanted to be seen to show a more robust approach to preventing terrorism and promoting integration. The Government literature is replete with reference to threats to security lying in the context of Islam and indeed has served to stigmatize Islam and Islamism. Miller uses the term the ‘satanization’ of Islam to refer to the way the British Press portray the Islamic religion (Miller, 2013). *Contest*, *Prevent* and the community cohesion agenda have been criticized for the way they seem to criminalise Muslims (Bartlett and Birdwell, 2010; Revell 2012, p.86) or for being founded on political and philosophical assumptions that Islam is associated with extremism and the failure of Muslim communities to integrate (Revell, 2012).

In 2012, still as part of the Government’s *Prevent* strategy, the REsilience Project was conceived. This was grounded in the RE context and according to Revell this is what set it apart from previous material. The project provides teachers with a series of Gateway materials aimed at promoting equality, diversity and tolerance. The material is located in the interpretive pedagogical framework (Jackson, 1997) which has become familiar with RE teachers over the past 15 yrs. Each gateway approaches a specific issue from common RE practices as outlined in the Non-Statutory Framework for RE (QCA, 2004:13) i.e there is emphasis on enabling teachers to create a classroom environment where all views are listened to and a safe space is provided for pupils to discuss their opinions; there is an opportunity to explore debates that may challenge assumptions about Islam and radicalization; suggestions to help students to respect all cultures and religious practices as well as advice on how teachers can adopt a neutral stance (Revell, 2012;p.88). The Gateway materials also do not place emphasis on Islam nor use this as an exemplar when discussing [*justified* religious] violence towards women, ‘honour crimes’ FGM and forced marriage. Where Islam is mentioned the document stresses that ‘it is important to emphasise that forced marriage is not a teaching of any religion (Revell, 2012: p.90). The materials also provide substantial theological or historical background for the topics (Revell, 2012). They also do not generalize about Muslim traditions or religious beliefs (Revell, 2012: 91).

Revell suggests that unlike any of the preceding material arising from *Contest* and *Prevent* Resilience actually considers the impact of discrimination and hatred against Muslims as part of the remit of contentious issues and more importantly highlights the harmful effect of stereotyping (Revell, 2012

The Theoretical Framework

In my research I want to explore RE teachers' own understanding of religiously inspired violence and to assess how these impact on their practice in the classroom. This will require analyzing if/how RE teachers have used the Gateway materials and critically evaluating the interpretive approach.

It is my premise that the teaching of religions in the classroom has become sanitized and that there is a tendency to treat them as unsullied truths (Miller, 2013). I will argue that a more rigorous and critical approach to the teaching of religiously inspired violence (and RE in general) is required if we are to empower students to live responsibly and respectfully in today's diverse society.

The theoretical framework I shall be using is that of critical theory and I shall be drawing on the work of Habermas and Freire

Pilot study

-Focus on the GCSE curriculum

-observe and record the lessons

-3 schools and a series of 5 lessons in each

-look at the way the teacher teaches it- body language-interaction with the class-intonation

-interview at the beginning and interview at the end: the interview will focus on what is in their heads: 1. What is RIV? 2. Do you translate this into your teaching practice? 3. Is there a correlation between your concepts and how you teach it? 4.

Do you feel your approach to teaching provides a fruitful theoretical perspective which enables students to view the issue of RIV objectively/in a balanced way?

Is there a correlation with this and their teaching? Is there a correlation with what's in their head/the concepts and how they deliver the topic?