

Beyond belief

In May, police feared a riot when the English Defence League (EDL) went online to arrange a protest outside a Mosque in York. But things didn't turn out quite as expected. Only six EDL protestors turned up outside the little brick building to find themselves hopelessly outnumbered by a crowd of more than a hundred Muslims and their supporters from the local community. The EDL members stubbornly went ahead with their protest anyway – draping a St George's flag over the Mosque's fence and shouting. People from the Mosque responded by offering them tea and biscuits. The demonstration soon fizzled out and the flag was neatly folded up by its owner, who then disappeared. The others were invited inside the Mosque for a look round, and ended up playing a friendly game of football with the people they'd come to protest against.

The Imam had got wind of the possible demonstration and instead of battenning down the hatches, or countering with a protest of his own, he'd decided to host an open day at the Mosque to educate the local community about Islam.

The power of education – specifically the power of religious education (RE) – is key to breaking down barriers and helping people to accept that it's okay for others to have different points of view. And yet the value of RE is being questioned as Michael Gove's overhaul of the curriculum continues.

The EDL protest in York was just a small part of the backlash suffered by Muslims in the wake of Lee Rigby's appalling murder by men proclaiming their allegiance to Islam. People are shocked, angry and naturally want justice, but innocent Muslims have become the target of their misplaced retribution. Men and women have been verbally abused, physically attacked and killed; Mosques have been sprayed with graffiti, set on fire and even bombed.

If Islam taught that cold blooded murder was acceptable, then the violence would make a twisted kind of sense, but of course, Islam teaches quite the opposite and Muslims are

RE's compulsory status within the curriculum is not without controversy – but if we want to live in a society of tolerance and understanding, then it's more important now than ever to protect – and even enhance – it, argues **Bob Ayres...**



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just as sickened by Lee Rigby's murder as anyone else. Yet somehow the message isn't getting through. Islam is seen as a monolith – a big brooding baddie that has but one thought in its head: the downfall of Western civilisation as we know it. And that's deeply worrying in a country – in a world – that is becoming increasingly multicultural.

Now, perhaps more than ever, there is a need for well taught and well resourced religious education in our schools, but recent surveys by the All Party Parliamentary Group on RE and the National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE) have shown that the subject is under threat. RE is supposedly a compulsory subject in all schools, and yet a third of secondary schools are cheerfully ignoring the legal requirements at Key Stage 4 and many Year 10 and 11 students do not receive any RE at all. Perhaps even more worrying is the statistic that 12 per cent of secondary schools admitted that legal requirements for RE were not even met at

Key Stage 3, where RE is often watered down to a thin gruel and fed sparingly to pupils through integrated humanities.

More than half of the teachers delivering RE in secondary schools have no qualifications or relevant expertise in the subject, which obviously has an effect on the quality of RE lessons. In a quarter of secondary schools, the number of specialist staff employed to teach RE was reduced in the last academic year – and eight out of ten schools blamed the introduction of the EBacc, which does not include RE.

So, religious education has a fight on its hands and several enemies to overcome. The first of these is its image problem. The popular perception of RE amongst parents, policy makers and even some head teachers is based on experiences gained a generation ago. Back in the bad old days, when the physical education teacher made you run around in your pants, and the history teacher preached Communism,

religious education was often called “religious instruction”, and it attempted to inculcate unresponsive teenagers with Christian beliefs. These days, a good RE lesson does not attempt to proselytise or close down discussion with dogma; instead, students learn about other people's religions to understand how their beliefs affect their lives and their motivation. Ethical and moral debates do not attempt to get a class to agree on a particular position but open up an issue to a wide variety of viewpoints, encouraging students to make up their own minds with good reasons for doing so. It's a heady mix of philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology and some really good stories.

Another opponent is the rise of secularism and the evangelical “New Atheism” of people like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. The argument goes that religion causes division and it isn't true anyway, so why should it have any place in a modern curriculum? But the argument misses the point: whether you believe in God or not, whether you are a practising member of a religion or not – there are people who do and people who are, and they have a huge influence on the world. And all beliefs are studied in RE, not just theistic ones, so Humanist viewpoints are included and discussed.

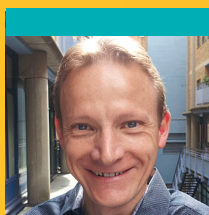
A little-mentioned problem is that RE – and whisper it quietly – is resented by some head teachers precisely because of its ‘compulsory’ status. All pupils should receive some measure of religious education in every year of their school lives whether they are taking an exam in it or not.

Contemporary, engaging resources are essential if RE is to be delivered in a way that could genuinely make a difference to young people's lives, rather than merely ticking boxes. TrueTube is an award-winning, charity-funded website that provides free films, lesson plans and assembly scripts for RE, PSHE and Citizenship at Key Stages 3 and 4.

Anne Krisman, head of RE at Little Heath Special School in the London Borough of Redbridge, is a regular user of the site. In a lesson about Islam, Anne used one of the site's recent Alien Abduction series in which members of different religions are beamed into the interrogation chamber of the alien Survey Ship ‘Pantheon’, presently in orbit around Earth:

“The class, who all have difficulties with speech and communication, watched the film together with complete attention,” she recalls. “There was a wealth of authentic information, plenty of colour, pace and illustrative images. Most importantly, there was an expert saying what their belief meant to them, in response to questions fired by an ‘alien’”.

Her pupils also enjoyed the film on Sikhism: “The class loved the enthusiastic young Sikh woman, Baldeep. She conveyed pure joy in sharing elements of her beliefs and this showed how much faith means to people. We RE teachers love to hear about religions from the inside, rather than from old out-of-date textbooks.”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BOB AYRES TAUGHT RE FOR FIFTEEN YEARS IN KENYA, BIRMINGHAM AND EAST LONDON BEFORE BECOMING EDUCATION PRODUCER AT TRUETUBE (TRUETUBE.CO.UK)

Understandably, many pupils hate sitting in a lesson they haven't opted for, causing inevitable discipline problems; and it irritates many curriculum managers because they have to find somewhere to fit it into an already overcrowded timetable. It's a small wonder then, that many schools decide to ignore the law altogether.

And Michael Gove hasn't helped with his exclusion of RE from the EBacc. However, at an education seminar hosted by Archbishop Justin Welby at Lambeth Palace in July, it appeared that Mr Gove has finally woken up to what RE teachers have been telling him for the last three years: “I think RE has suffered as a result of my belief that the protection that it had in the curriculum was sufficient, and I don't think that I've done enough.” He also pledged that DfE officials would, “work to exemplify what is the very best practice to encourage others to follow it”.

This was a welcome, but somewhat disingenuous statement. When the Ebacc was first announced, RE teachers immediately flagged up the omission of their subject and warned of the obvious problems it would cause. So RE teachers across the land are hoping that Mr Gove fulfils his promise to help revitalise their subject in a political and cultural climate that desperately needs it.

The days when people could live in the same community all their lives, and never meet anyone of a different race, religion or even a slightly different worldview are long gone. And that's a good thing. It means that people are exposed to new ideas and new experiences against which to test their own views and understanding of life. It's how progress is made. However, progress means change and it can be an unsettling experience. For a vocal and occasionally violent minority it means digging in to a strongly held position, and preparing to fight off all-comers. The only way to prevent this kind of polarisation is through education. With greater understanding, people cease to see a religion as a homogenous edifice and realise that within each tradition there are a variety of points of view. They learn to empathise with individuals rather than continuing to stare up at a blank monolith.