



AULRE 2021

Researching RE: changing times for Religious Education

Guest Editors' Introduction

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The Association of University Lecturers of Religious Education (AULRE) is delighted to be presenting this special edition of the Journal of Religious Education (JRE). AULRE is the United Kingdom network for learning, teaching and research in religion and education and has also been forging strong links with religious educators based in Ireland. We held our one-day online conference on the 22nd June 2021—the online event substituted for the annual conference that is normally conducted as a physical face-to-face conference. The event was organised by Dr Sean Whittle in association with Canterbury Christ Church University and the conference was generously hosted online by the Culham St. Gabriel's Trust, reflecting the strong links among the various stakeholders who support Religious Education (RE) in the UK.

The online conference aimed to continue and progress the national and international profile and impact of the AULRE conferences of the last five years. The day was deemed to be highly successful by the participants and the two keynotes, Dr Kathryn Wright of Culham St. Gabriel's Trust and Professor Lynn Revel of Canterbury Christ Church University, set a high level of academic and practical engagement with some of the major themes in RE in the United Kingdom.

This special edition of the journal provides a selection of some of the papers that were delivered at the conference and complements the AULRE special edition of the JRE in 2020. The articles in the 2021 special edition represent the variety and richness of the individual inputs and the edition includes articles that are conceptual, historical, philosophical, theological, empirical and collaborative writing. The topics are varied, yet there are some recurring themes across the different contributions. Both Keith Sharpe and Brian Gates, for example, are acutely aware of the political interests that have determined the direction of RE at various points in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Sometimes these interests reflect wider opinion, the opinion of pressure groups, or they appear to be based

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on personal agendas. Unsurprisingly, there are a number of articles that address the highly topical issues in the UK around the national entitlement for RE and the role of worldviews. This continues to be a source of major discussion, particularly in England.

Professor Keith Sharpe contributes some very useful historical background to the development of RE in England and Wales from the period of the 1944 Education Act. The 1944 Act was designed to address the challenges of the 'dual system' of school education: the public authority schools and the church schools. There were serious concerns about the condition of many of the church schools. The solution, after some careful political manoeuvring orchestrated by RA Butler, was a national system of schooling that allowed the churches to retain some level of control in their own schools and exercise religious influence in all schools. Sharpe argues that the aim at that time was to create a 'Christian population'—the education system supporting the maintenance of a Christian national identity. Sharpe turns his attention to more recent developments which, in his view, pose serious challenges for RE in England.

Professor Brian Gates is a highly respected international academic who has worked at the forefront of RE for many years in England. In his article he focuses on ten indicative topics for researching RE under three main headings: Provision, Horizon stretching and Centre Point. The first heading, Provision, addresses some highly relevant issues that affect the successful delivery of RE in schools and the future of RE. These include the qualifications of academic staff who deliver the academic and professional education and training, the opportunities for inter-disciplinary learning, the nature and extent of provision of RE in Further Education, the level of understanding of school leaders, who are ultimately responsible for RE, and the directions and changes in RE prompted by political agendas. He also provides some very interesting suggestions about a way forward for collective worship and outlines four shaping ingredients of collective worship: special moments, belonging and boundaries, subject celebration and living faith streams.

The article by Professor Lynn Revel explores the weaknesses of the dominant world religions model in RE that minimises differences and presents essentialised constructs of religion. This finely detailed analysis argues that the current approach to world religions sacrifices diversity, history, culture, geography, politics and economics to focus on internal beliefs and practices. Professor Revel uses the practical example of teaching resources on the key features of a mosque to illustrate her argument. The vast majority of the teaching resources in the large sample provide no contextual information about the featured mosques and presume a homogeneity of practice abstracted from the influences of local tradition and culture. She then develops a series of arguments to support two of the factors of worldviews: the teaching must be interdisciplinary, and everyone has a worldview.

Dr Bernadette Sweetman from Dublin City University focuses on an area of RE that deserves more attention: Adult Religious Education. She reports on phase two of the Adult Religious Education and Faith Development (AREFD) project based in the Mater Dei Centre for Religious Education at Dublin City University. She proposes that some of the insights that have emerged from this project can contribute to Initial Teacher Education, especially for those preparing to be religious educators. She concludes that a vision of RE that is lifelong and relational is of benefit across educational sectors.

Dr Emma Salter addresses the national entitlement for the study of religion and worldviews. The paper provides two approaches to the discussion of the national entitlement. First, there is an overview of some of the leading arguments in the recent debates about the national entitlement and the inclusion of worldviews. This represents the views of academics and professional organisations. Second, Dr Salter presents some findings from some responses from primary teachers to the national entitlement. This provides some intriguing

initial insights from practitioners. On the whole the teachers were positive about the developments, though did express reservations about the continual low investment which affects the delivery of RE. They identified a lack of resources, insufficient curriculum time and little access to continuing professional development in the provision of RE.

Professor Robert Bowie and Dr Ralph Norman of Canterbury Christ Church University argue for the place of transcendence in the contemporary university—this can be found in the work of theology departments. This timely article is within the context of the struggle to retain Theology and Religious Studies in some universities as student enrolments falter. They present some sophisticated arguments, drawing on Philosophy and Theology, to uncover the tensions in the divided perceptions of the legitimacy of the position of religion and theological discourse in higher education. They posit that higher education is intellectually and spiritually impoverished when education is confined and reduced to utilitarian aims and objectives. A university, on the other hand, which is open to the question of God allows for the critical and expansive forms of intelligence.

Alexis Stones and Dr Jo Fraser-Pearce present some initial findings from their research project on RE, knowledge and big questions. They use Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice to analyse their data collected from group interviews with Key Stage 3 pupils (aged 12–14) from around England. The sample was diverse in terms of demographical setting, socio-economic context and type of school (religious or non-religious). The paper provides a detailed and critical account of the various theories that they draw upon: Young's powerful knowledge and Sen's capabilities and explore these in relation to Critical RE (as developed by Andrew Wright). The paper then presents some examples of pupil responses to discussion about big questions and how these could be interpreted in the light of these theories. The findings are from the initial stages of analysis but there are already serious and troubling signs of epistemic injustice that have implications for learning and teaching in RE.

The article by Dr Kathryn Wright, Justine Bell, Claire Hinton, Fiona Moss, Ed Pawson and Dr Sean Whittle is a fascinating and innovative example of a pilot leadership programme using collaborative writing. The aim of the pilot project was to help teachers of Religion and Worldviews find their voices as leaders and was focused around four areas of leadership: research engaged, curriculum engaged, classroom engaged and politically influenced. The members of the steering group of the programme were drawn from a variety of professional backgrounds (all connected to RE in England) and provide a richness of experience and expertise. The series of reflections from the steering group on their different roles in the programme was designed to be written in the first person and provide a personal account and, once combined, produce 'a rich, personal and diverse commentary on the programme'.

Dr Sean Whittle develops a case for discarding the nomenclature of *Catholic Religious Education* and replacing it with a more suitable *Religious Education in Catholic schools*. He argues from philosophy adopting ideas from Ryle (category mistake), Wittgenstein (family resemblance) and Hirst (tribal education), and he draws on theological perspectives emphasising that the term *Catholic Religious Education* is not coherent with the ecumenical stance of the Catholic Church embraced over fifty years ago by the Second Vatican Council. This careful attention to nomenclature ensures that there is no confusion about the educational nature of RE in Catholic schools and less likelihood of any conflation with catechesis. Dr Whittle's carefully structured arguments are a reminder of the pressing need for close attention to clarity in terminology—which is vital for communication and understanding in the field of research into Catholic education.

The article by Professor Stephen McKinney examines some key moments that feature Mary in the infancy narratives of Luke and Matthew, interpreting them using the lenses of the preferential option of the poor and forcible displacement. The article focuses initially on the Annunciation and the Magnificat where Mary is presented as a poor young woman who possesses great faith. The article then explores the journey to Bethlehem (Luke's Gospel) and the flight into Egypt as examples of internal displacement and external displacement. The article proposes that this positions Mary as an exemplar for teaching Catholic social justice in Catholic schools. This ambitious article acknowledges that this is not the customary way to view Mary in these passages but invites the reader to reflect on these interpretations as the Catholic Church and Catholic schools attempt to understand and reject the poverty and deprivation, in all of their forms, that are prevalent in the contemporary world.

Dr Pat Hannam's article draws on her experience in designing the RE curriculum in her local region of the UK, which will be the agreed syllabus from the autumn of 2021. The analysis is presented in three broad steps, a flavour of the aspects of education theory informing the current syllabus review and re-development. The first step involves consideration of the implications of the lack of education theory in RE discourse in recent times, before the second step which lays out ways in which the review has sought to remedy this in *Living Difference IV*. The third section is in the form of a discussion and considers some practical implications. These include (i) a focus on the importance of teaching and the professional responsibilities of each teacher and (ii) for curriculum making. In so doing this paper raises questions for consideration by the RE community, in relation to current emphasis being placed on knowledge. Dr Hannam concedes that this article is limited in just how much it can sum up, but it does succeed in giving an overview of the issues in RE curriculum design. The article is completed with some concluding thoughts about why all this might matter in a time of pandemic, climate crisis and populism.

Dr Meehan and Dr Laffan present an interesting analysis of RE in Ireland from the perspective of teachers. The Irish religious landscape is changing. The Census data reveal that the percentage of those who identify as Catholic is in steady decline, while the proportion of those with no religion continues to rise. Christian religious practice in Ireland is also decreasing, especially among young people. Catholic schools, once the dominant provider of second level education, are now in a minority. This changing landscape has influenced RE in second level schools. It is now an optional subject, and the historic tradition of denominational, confessional RE has given way to an approach designed to be inclusive of students of all faith and none. Yet the surrounding discourse is unsupported by the perspectives of RE teachers. This study attempts to address this knowledge gap by investigating their views and experiences, particularly with regard to inclusion. Results indicate that teachers are concerned about 'religious students'. While new in the Irish context, this situation reflects the findings of international research which suggest that in a rapidly secularising society, those who continue to practice any faith, especially the once-majority faith, are vulnerable. Findings signpost evidence of this, with RE teachers most concerned about the bullying of Catholic students and least concerned about the bullying of atheists. This spotlights an intriguing situation in Ireland, where RE teachers might need to actively ensure their lessons are safe spaces for young people who hold and practice the Catholic faith.

Dr Patricia Kieran and Dr Aiveen Mullally's article also casts the spotlight on teachers of RE in Ireland through a scrutiny of the attitudes of pre-service teachers, who are engaged in their Initial Teacher Education (ITE). Beginning with an overview of the contemporary context for teaching RE in Ireland, the article then profiles changing religious demographics in an increasingly secular context. Drs Kieran and Mullally present the findings of a

two-year mixed-methods study undertaken in two third-level Catholic colleges in Ireland, investigating four hundred third-level ITE students' perceptions of the religiously unaffiliated. The research data reveals the complexity and ambivalence of ITE students' attitudes to teaching RE in primary schools.

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