



## AULRE 2022

### Religious education and social justice in a time of climate crisis Guest editors' introduction

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This 2022 special edition is the third special edition devoted to papers that were presented at the conference of the Association of University Lecturers of Religious Education in the UK (AULRE). The previous AULRE special editions were published in the *Journal of Religious Education* (JRE) in 2020 and 2021.

The 2022 AULRE conference was held at Newman University Birmingham on 12 and 13 May. The conference returned to a physical face-to-face format after two years of online delivery. This was very warmly welcomed by the members of AULRE and the conference participants enjoyed the opportunity to meet up with old friends and meet some new ones. The keynote speakers were Anna Strhan who spoke on the experiences of non-religious children in religious education (RE) and Stephen McKinney who spoke on the topic of social justice and religion. There was a very interesting variety of papers that addressed the conference theme and wider issues in RE.

All who delivered a paper were invited to submit their articles for peer review and possible inclusion in this special edition of the JRE. While there was still much debate about the worldviews approach and religious literacy, serious discussions arose about decolonising RE and the RE curriculum and the need for deeper research into other forms of literacy, such as epistemic literacy, and this included critiques of the expansion of the use of 'literacies'. We were delighted with the response and the range and scope of the twelve papers that are presented in this special edition. There are some papers that are philosophical/theological such as Seán Henry's very thoughtful paper and Whittle's views on confessional education in Catholic schools in England. Kate Christopher, Jeremiah Adebolajo and Alexis Stones and Jo Fraser-Pearce tackle major issues in epistemology. Some of the authors have used quantitative and qualitative research to extend our knowledge on key topics. In terms of quantitative research, Richardson has focused on nationalism, religion and education in Northern Ireland and Ball on the legacy of colonialisation of the images and perspective on Jesus in the curriculum. Strhan and Shillitoe present the findings of

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some qualitative research on the views of non-religious children in RE. Some of the papers focus in on aspects of the RE curriculum and Imran Mogra and Patricia Hannam and Christopher May critically examine different aspects of the curriculum. Another group of papers explore educational policy and practice and Smalley's inventive paper on the metaphors used (primarily) by Ofsted provides a striking critique. McKinney offers a paper that explores the devastating and tragic outcomes of a policy of cultural assimilation in Christian residential schools in Canada.

Dr Patricia Hannam and Christopher May have written on RE and social justice: reflections on an approach to teaching RE. Throughout the paper, they draw on the insights of some key thinkers such as Arendt, Freire, Weil and Biesta. They begin with a discussion into the relationship between RE and social justice. They then develop an argument that shows why it might matter that an RE which has an interest in all children and young people and their present and future lives, should first attend to what it is teachers should seek to do in their teaching. They argue that such a focus on teachers and their teaching is of prime importance. They develop their argument through several stages. They begin by considering what it is that education in the public sphere should seek to achieve, and they then move on to outline their position on social justice. This lays the groundwork for their explanation of why it is insufficient to conceptualise RE only in terms of matters to be encountered and studied through a pre-planned curriculum and that the relationship between the teacher and child or young person is significant.

They propose that the experience of each child and young person in their wider community, must form the starting point of any course of study, and that the teacher should begin by bringing the child to attend to this experience. This is because the curriculum cannot be planned and constructed abstracted from the context of the child. They want to emphasise that since education is not something that takes place in abstraction, it requires the teacher to be attentive to the particular child, the one who is in front of the teacher and in a particular place and time. They then demonstrate the practical application, as modelled in a Locally Agreed Syllabus for RE: Living Difference IV, and then in the context of RE taught in a school in an area of high deprivation in the southeast of Hampshire, UK.

Anna Strhan and Rachael Shillitoe provide a fascinating series of insights into the experiences of non-religious children in RE. This paper draws from original qualitative data that has been collected as part of a study that explores what it means to be 'non-believing' and 'non-religious' for primary school children. The findings they present indicate that the non-religious children in the sample have complex concerns, experiences and (non) beliefs. The children emphasise the importance of respect and equality and have a great concern for the environment. They are anxious that diversity is recognised and respected in school and society. The authors argue persuasively that these children, as a matter of social justice, should be offered opportunities to engage meaningfully with non-religious views and be supported in making sense of their non-religious experiences and views.

There are two articles that probe the confessional approach to contemporary RE. Norman Richardson has conducted some empirical work into the relationship between nationalism and religion in school education in Northern Ireland. Sean Whittle argues that there has been insufficient attention in Catholic schools in England to a serious discussion on the nature of a confessional approach and the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach.

Norman Richardson has been researching the views of teachers in Northern Ireland into nationalism and the positions they take on national identity. He commences his paper with a discussion on nationalism and the close connections that often exist between nationalism, religion and education. He then focuses in on the historical and contemporary situation

in Northern Ireland and the contrasting positions adopted by the two major factions. He next explains the schooling in Northern Ireland which, despite a small number of integrated schools, remains divided along religious grounds into Catholic schools and the state schools (populated mainly by children from a protestant background). It is within this background that the research was conducted with teachers and student teachers of RE to see if they held nationalist views and if these views were related to religion. The results are very interesting and perhaps surprising in that a significant percentage of the respondents took a middle line between a confessional approach to RE and a non-confessional approach. He concludes that he is reasonably optimistic about these findings and argues for a shared approach to RE. This is a very important paper from an academic who has made a significant contribution to RE in Northern Ireland over a long period of time.

Sean Whittle analyses the lack of critical engagement with the idea of confessional RE against the backdrop of the newly developed curriculum guidance document *Religious Education Directory* (RED) for Catholic schools in England. He begins by outlining what he refers to as the 'benign state' of RE in English Catholic schools. The subject has an enhanced status in the Catholic school, there is sufficient time in the timetable and pupils can be entered for public examinations in RE. It is intended the RED will align RE in Catholic schools with powerful knowledge and a knowledge-rich RE curriculum. This may safeguard and enrich RE in Catholic schools. However, he does think that the topic of confessional RE in Catholic schools needs careful scrutiny. He provides some strong arguments why this confessional RE is not internally contested within the context of Catholic schools in England. First, the historical position that Catholic schools help to support and retain Catholic identity in a sometimes hostile and anti-Catholic environment 'trumps' any serious discussion about the advantages, and importantly, the disadvantages, of confessionalism. The second argument is related to the first and is focused on the Catholic schools upholding the rights of the parents, as advocated by the Vatican documents on education, to bring their children up in the Catholic faith. Another connected argument claims that the Catholic school provides a necessary post-baptismal education and formation. He provides a further argument that explores the issue of the intention of Catholic RE and the potential to attempt to indoctrinate, no matter how unsuccessful the attempt. He presents a challenging case that confessional RE in Catholic schools should now be discussed with some urgency and that, in the current sociological context and the population demographics of the Catholic schools, there should be a move towards non-confessional RE in Catholic schools.

Seán Henry has contributed a very carefully written and thoughtful paper on a way to ease tensions across religious and LGBTQ concerns in education. The paper is titled, *Dissenting from heteronormativity: growing sideways in religious education*. He has theorised dissent from the heteronormativity of religion in religious schools, and in doing so he has used the valuable image of growing sideways because it offers productive inroads for addressing some of his earlier concerns with religious identity. It also helps to address the inordinate focus on the propositional that is often prevalent in the religion-education nexus. With respect to exceeding the limits of religious identity, the image of growing sideways allows for dissent from heteronormativity. This is not so much because of the 'permissibility' of this within pre-existing religious structures and/or norms (though this might, incidentally, be the case), but more because of the myriad interconnections already coalescing in young people's encounters with religion (through, for example, encounters with texts, ideas, ritual practices, and so on). He argues that the myriad nature of these interconnections is crucial as it is through these that the plurality inherent to young people's embodied, affective, and material

encounters with religion can be exposed, and the absolutism often characteristic of heteronormativity undermined as a result. In this sense, dissent as a mode of growing sideways positions it as a practice enabled by, and attentive to, resources otherwise 'untapped in the present' of religious encounters, i.e., resources like desire, imagination, excitement, pleasure, and pain that are so often overlooked in absolutist heteronormative religious discourses and practices.

Two articles address the very topical issues of the historical effects of colonisation on the curriculum and schooling and contemporary endeavours to expose this colonisation and move to a position of decolonisation. The two articles are very different: one focuses on decolonising Jesus in English primary schools and the other highlights the tragic consequences of the collusion of the Catholic Church (and other Christian churches) in the attempt at cultural genocide in the residential schools in Canada.

Justine Ball argues that the European images of Jesus that are prevalent in schools can help to obscure the Jewish upbringing of Jesus, his practice of Judaism, and the origins of the early Christian church. She points out that, while the decolonising of the curriculum has been a focus in Religious Studies and higher education, there has been very little research into decolonising the curriculum in RE. She proposes some practical approaches that include using artwork about Jesus and Christians that is drawn from among the diverse Christian communities in the UK rather than continuing to use the dominant European images and artwork. There could be a greater emphasis on teaching about the different local and national Christian churches, so that children can have a clearer understanding of the diversity within the Christian church. The aim is to help children and young people understand that Jesus belonged to a historical Jewish context and not a European one. She conducted some research with teachers and school children to find out about their views about Jesus. The results from the children are very interesting and Justine provides a detailed explanation of her findings. While there are some exceptions, the majority of the children had a conception of a white Jesus and a European dominated Christianity. She provides a number of recommendations. RE should engage with the findings in Theology and Religious Studies to revise the ways in which Jesus and his background are depicted and taught. The RE syllabi and resources should be carefully examined and reconfigured to include greater diversity. There should be a focus on this issue in teacher education and in the continuing development of teachers. The worldviews framework for teaching RE could prove to be invaluable as this will help teachers to acknowledge the influence of colonisation of RE and support a greater focus on diversity.

Stephen McKinney probes into the reasons for the repeated apologies by Pope Francis for the activities of members of the Catholic Church in the residential schools in Canada. The schools were modelled on an American approach to assimilate, not integrate, the indigenous population by focusing on the children. The children were to be 'civilised' and 'evangelised'. There were similar schools established in Australia and New Zealand. These schools were to be part of the strategy to impose western ideas and the Christian religion on the 'uncivilised' who held 'superstitious' beliefs. Often the children were given new Christian names and numbers; siblings were separated and, in most schools, the use of their own languages and practice of their own customs and traditions, including religious practices, was forbidden. The separation of children from their families and their culture had a deep and lasting impact on the indigenous communities in Canada. While the schools were eventually closed many of the survivors have struggled with the psychological and cultural damage of the experience of this form of education. There have been many public apologies from the Christian churches and Pope Francis undertook a penitential pilgrimage in 2022 to apologise to those who had been affected by this inhumane strategy.

Paul Smalley has contributed a very engaging article in his critical analysis of the use of metaphors in English RE. He explores the complexity of some of the theory around metaphors and the use of metaphors and, in particular, as developed by Professor Anna Sfard. Smalley focuses in on the acquisition metaphor and the participation metaphor for learning. These are often over simplified and misunderstood and most learning is a combination of the two rather than an emphasis on one of the metaphors. He then examines the use of metaphors in RE, including the use of metaphors by Trevor Cooling to explain how *Religion and Worldviews*, published by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC) in 2018 should be viewed. Cooling stated that the report should be viewed as a pebble in the pond to cause ripples rather than commandments written on tablets of stone. Smalley then proceeds to examine other uses of metaphor such as the Ofsted metaphor that the curriculum is a journey, noting with some humour, that they are not referring to the curriculum as a luxury cruise. He further explores and critiques the Ofsted metaphor of the curriculum as a progression model and the deep dive metaphor. Finally, he examines the Core Content Framework (CCF) and/or the Early Career Framework (ECF). His close examination of these different metaphors highlights the elusiveness of language and the identity crisis in contemporary RE.

Kate Christopher explores the relation between education and autonomy and the liberal education agenda. Liberal education is not accepted and adopted lightly, and she provides two serious critiques: pupils' discomfort and the capability of the liberal approach to represent diverse voices and approaches. She is anxious that children are not inducted into a 'custodial' approach to knowledge and understanding that ultimately seeks a form of learning that is acquiescence. This can be combined with approaches to RE that have not engaged with issues of power and gender and controversial topics. These approaches wish to avoid causing offence and present religion in a positive and benign light but avoid issues of injustice and exclusion. She is concerned about the uncritical, ahistorical, acontextual abstractions that are characteristic of approaches to world religions in RE. She seeks a greater level of criticality in the approaches to RE and a more urgent sense of justice in the ways the earth and the uses of the resources of the earth are understood.

Alexis Stones and Jo Fraser-Pearce have continued their research into knowledge and the use of knowledge in RE. In their article, they explore the roles and understandings of knowledge in RE. Plural understandings of knowledge in schools (and society) led them to be concerned about the relationships between knowledge and social justice. They also clarify that one's own relationship with knowledge(s) is significant and is, therefore, important for students and teachers to develop to respond to the epistemically plural RE curriculum and classroom. They draw on literacy frameworks to identify the need for non-hierarchical conceptualisations of knowledge that include the expert and every day. They acknowledge the need for a particular disposition when approaching knowledge about religion and worldviews. Building on the analysis of their empirical study and subsequent developments of epistemic literacy, they revisit the notion of epistemic justice and present a theoretical justification for the experiential preparation of teachers that draws on Biesta's reformed *Bildung* of encounter and Rawls' "veil of ignorance". They argue that the promotion of epistemic literacy is vitally important to engender a greater epistemic justice in the classroom.

Imran Mogra has undertaken research on the social justice dimension of Islam in relation to children and maktab education syllabi. He examined curricula that were developed by British Muslim scholars, designed for maktab aged pupils and taught in the UK. He studied three full texts – Asad's *Gift for Muslims*, An Nasihah's *Islamic Curriculum* and *Islamic Studies* by Madaris-e-Salafiah. The focus was on discerning matters related to the conception of social justice by addressing questions such as what Muslim children are

taught about justice and injustice from a vertical and horizontal plane. He begins his study with an overview of the theoretical understanding and practical application of the meaning of justice in Islam. The findings are presented under themes which were selected to represent both macro and micro levels of rights, social justice and operation. The themes include: charity, orphans, global trade and the poor, the environment and oppression. The findings suggest that these curricula instil prosocial values ostensibly at the micro-level and, to some degree, at the macro level.

In his paper, Jeremiah Adebolajo proposes the application of a unique methodological approach to the research into people who have been converted to Islam in contemporary Britain. There has been significant research emphasis on the policies to integrate Muslims into contemporary society but a dearth of literature exploring the experiences of Muslim converts. The paper critiques the orientalist framings of Islamic identity and the secular readings of conversion and, instead, advocates the use of a unique methodological dialectic which foregrounds an Islamic epistemology in conjunction with critical narrative and ethnographic approaches. The article contributes to a wider discourse within academia about the ability of the contemporary study of religion to reflect the increasingly diverse world of religious and non-religious practice found in contemporary Britain. The article concludes by asserting insider positionality and the primacy of reflexivity as an approach to ensure intellectual rigour. This approach of the insider research can be a means of recovering the 'theological voice' in secular discourses. Further, it is, in some ways, a response to the developing literature surrounding the reframing of RE in Britain.

We conclude with our thanks to Newman University and the Journal of Religious Education. As always, the hospitality at Newman University was exemplary and we thank all at Newman, especially Professor Sue Docherty for her support in the planning and operation of the conference. This special edition would not have been possible without the advice, guidance and generous support of JRE Editorial Officer, Jenni Woodward and we offer her our heartfelt thanks.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declares that they have no conflict of interest.

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