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Journal of Beliefs and Values

Special Issue:

‘Religion in Education: Findings from the Religion and Society Programme’

Guest Editors: Elisabeth Arweck & Robert Jackson

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Editorial

Elisabeth Arweck and Robert Jackson

From conference to special issue

The present special issue of the *Journal of Beliefs and Values* includes a selection of the papers presented to the conference ‘Religion in Education: Findings from the Religion and Society Programme’, which was held at the University of Warwick in July 2011. The conference was hosted by the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU) as part of the Religion and Society Programme (jointly funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council—AHRC—and the Economic and Social Research Council—ESRC), at the behest of the Director of the Programme Professor Linda Woodhead.ⁱ The main aim of the conference was to offer a forum for the dissemination of (in some cases initial) findings from the various education projects in the programme. The conference was held under the *aegis* of the Religion and Society programme, the largest cluster of research projects on Religion and Society so far to have been conducted in the United Kingdom.ⁱⁱ

The conference was designed to place the two large projects—‘Does Religious Education Work?’ (located at the University of Glasgow, under the direction of Professor James Conroy), and ‘Young People’s Attitudes to Religious Diversity’ (located in Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit [WRERU] at the University of Warwick, under the direction of Professor Robert Jackson)—at the centre of the programme, and to invite all the research teams within the Programme whose projects were related to education and/ or young people to present at the conference. Inevitably, some of projects teams were not able to accept the invitation. However, many of the speakers were deeply involved with projects focusing on religion and education and religion and youth.

This also applied to the invited audience at the conference, which included a range of professionals concerned with education and young people in various contexts. Conference delegates also represented many kinds of potential users of the education and youth research from the Religion and Society Programme. They included: members of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (including, at national level, representatives of different religious traditions and secular humanism), members of key professional associations concerned with religious education, editors of key publications in the RE world, advisers from local authorities and religious bodies, representatives of charities concerned with religious education and dialogue (including the Tony Blair Faith Foundation), representatives of academic associations (including the Association of University Lecturers in Religious Education—AULRE—and the British Association for the Study of Religions—BASR), teachers and representatives of teachers’ organisations (including the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education—NATRE), and MA and PhD students from the University of Warwick and other universities in the UK. Delegates also represented various geographical areas, both within and outside

the UK, with participants from England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales as well as from European countries (including Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Estonia).

The conference coincided with news about the tragic events which were sending shock waves through Norway—the bomb which had been detonated in Oslo and the deaths of many young people attending a youth camp on the island of Utøya. This news highlighted the various ways in which our personal and professional relationships are interconnected and how the impact of such news is felt beyond distance and national borders, as we become conscious of how easily colleagues face unexpected turn of events: for example, the bomb in Oslo caused destruction in the vicinity of the new offices of the European Wergeland Centre, with which WRERU has close ties—colleagues from the Centre and other parts of Norway were present at the conference, all visibly shaken by the violent acts aimed at the whole nation.

Why study religions in publicly funded schools?

The question might be asked why religion(s) should be studied in publicly funded schools at this point in time. There are both ‘intrinsic’ and ‘instrumental’ reasons for studying religion(s) in publicly funded schools. Underlying the former is the argument that a liberal education should cover all distinctive areas of human experience or ‘realms of meaning’, while underlying the latter is the argument that some understanding of religion(s) is needed to promote social cohesion and to enhance a range of aspects relevant to young people’s development. For example, their social development might be enhanced through knowledge and understanding of culture, through engagement in democratic citizenship and through practices encouraging religious freedom and tolerance. At a personal level, engaging with religious diversity provides opportunities for

young people's moral and spiritual development, and for clarifying their own ideas and values. The points on social and personal development accord with the voices of young people across Europe, which the REDCo project (e.g. Jackson 2012a),ⁱⁱⁱ sought to capture; the importance of listening to the voices of young people is also emphasised in the various projects concerning religion, education, and youth within the Religion and Society Programme.

The climate for the study of religions in publicly funded schools in England and Wales has undergone change, which can be related to two phases. The first, between the late 1960s and the late 1990s, was marked by secularising processes, the rise of Religious Studies in universities (bringing global awareness), and pluralisation through migration (with the creation of good community relations and of a laboratory for the study of diaspora religions). The second phase, from the late 1990s to the present, with special relevance of the post-9/ 11 period, is characterised by debates about the post-secular—the role of religion in the public sphere (for example, New Labour's stance on faith schools), increased awareness of global Islam, the Internet, New Labour's community cohesion agenda, and the current coalition government's 'inadvertent' marginalisation of RE—a point to which we shall return below.

On the wider European level, a number of European institutions have—in the period following 9/ 11—been concerned with the study of religions in schools: most notable are the Council of Europe (comprising 47 member states), the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) (comprising 56 participant states), and the European Union (comprising 27 member states; the REDCo project was within the European Commission's Framework 6 research programme). The following sets out different aspects related to these European institutions.

Since 2002, the Council of Europe has given close attention to dealing with education about religions and non-religious convictions in public schools across Europe. In that year, the Council of Europe launched a major project on the study of religions as part of intercultural education entitled ‘Intercultural Education and the Challenge of Religious Diversity and Dialogue in Europe’ (Jackson 2007, 2010). The project had various outputs, but most importantly, the Committee of Ministers—the Foreign Ministers of all 47 member states—agreed (in December 2008) a policy recommendation on the dimension of religious and non-religious convictions within intercultural education. The Recommendation (Council of Europe 2008) was circulated to all member states.

In the light of the Council of Europe’s tripartite aims—to protect human rights, pluralist democracy, and the rule of law; to promote awareness and development of Europe’s cultural identity and diversity; and to seek solutions to social problems, such as discrimination against minorities, xenophobia, intolerance—its policy is set out in *Intercultural Education and the Challenge of Religious Diversity and Dialogue* (ibid) with dissemination by the European Wergeland Centre, Oslo, which—since its inauguration in May 2009—supports intercultural, human rights, and citizenship education, including the dimension of religion.

The Council of Europe project on intercultural education and religious diversity and dialogue (2002–2008) resulted in a book (published in various European languages) (Keast 2007) and a Ministerial Policy Recommendation (December 2008), with further follow-up projects (2011–13). The recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the dimension of religious and non-religious convictions within intercultural education include the following elements: principles, objectives, attitudes, educational preconditions, learning methods, initial and in-service teacher

training, research/ evaluation, with an emphasis on competences and values as well as on knowledge. To focus on two of the elements—objectives and educational preconditions—as most relevant here, the former include the following:

- ❖ developing a tolerant attitude and respect for the right to hold a particular belief
- ❖ nurturing a sensitivity to the diversity of religions and non-religious convictions
- ❖ promoting communication and dialogue
- ❖ providing opportunity to create spaces for dialogue
- ❖ addressing sensitive or controversial issues
- ❖ developing skills of critical evaluation and reflection
- ❖ combating prejudice and stereotypes

The educational preconditions comprise:

- ❖ sensitivity to the equal dignity of every individual
- ❖ capacity to put oneself in the place of others ... to establish ... mutual trust and understanding
- ❖ co-operative learning in which *peoples of all traditions* can be included and participate;
- ❖ provision of a *safe learning space* to encourage expression without fear of being judged or held to ridicule

A joint project of the Council of Europe and the European Wergeland Centre is currently working on a ‘road map’ to assist member states in adapting and implementing the recommendation within their own particular contexts.

The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is the largest regional security organisation; formed in 1970s, its approach to security includes the human dimension as well as the politico-military, the environmental and economic dimensions. In November 2007, the OSCE, through its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), launched the *Toledo*

Guiding Principles (OSCE 2007), a standard-setting document issued by consensus of the OSCE's 56 Foreign Ministers, after having been drafted by an interdisciplinary and inclusive group of lawyers, academics, and educators. The twin aims of the *Principles* are: a) to contribute to an improved understanding of the world's increasing religious diversity and the growing presence of religion in the public sphere and b) to assist OSCE participating states in promoting study of and knowledge about religions and beliefs in schools as a tool to enhance religious freedom and increase tolerance.

The current situation of RE in England and Wales, created by the impact of the current government's policy, has been marked by a trend towards marginalising the subject. This trend started in late 2010 with the White Paper on *The Importance of Teaching*, which ended the policy on community cohesion, and continued with: the omission of RE in the EBacc (English Baccalaureate) in July 2011, which means that many pupils will take only a 'recognized' humanities subject; the withdrawal of contributions to the continuing professional development costs for M-level courses for teachers; the closure of courses due to the number of PGCE (Post-Graduate Certificate in Education) RE places being halved; the erosion of national and local advice to support RE; and the Academies Act of 2010, which allows schools to leave the oversight of local authorities without any legal requirement to teach RE or maintain links with the local SACRE (Standard Advisory Committee for Religious Education). At school level, the fallout of this trend is reflected in the findings of an online survey of RE teachers by the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE), conducted over a ten-day period in May 2011, with the aim to examine the impact of the EBacc proposals on RE in English secondary schools (see also Chater 2011). Focusing its analysis on a sub-set of 1,157 academies and community and grammar schools, NATRE (2011) found that

- ❖ the legal provision for RE at Key Stage 4 (upper secondary level) was not met in 24–31% schools (with the prediction that this rate would increase in 2011–12);
- ❖ 34–40% of the schools reported a drop in entries between 2010–11 and 2011–12 for GCSE exams at age 16;
- ❖ over 50% of the schools which had decreased entry levels gave the impact of the new EBacc as the reason;
- ❖ 25–30% of the schools reported reductions for 2011–12 in specialist RE staff; and
- ❖ in 10–14% of the schools, the statutory requirements for Key Stage 3 would not be met in 2011–12.

In contrast, research points to the importance of RE for young people. For example, at European level, the REDCo project found that: pupils see the RE classroom as a potentially ‘safe space’ for dialogue; pupils want peaceful co-existence based on knowledge about each other’s religions and worldviews and sharing common interests or doing things together; and many pupils who have a firm religious commitment do not feel threatened by dialogue with others or by learning about others, although some feel vulnerable. (Jackson 2012b)

Research also points to the importance of RE regarding policy and practice. Again, using REDCo findings, there was strong support from pupils for applying democratic principles in the school and the classroom, which accords with the Council of Europe documents cited above. The REDCo data also pointed to the need to contextualise these principles in each country. Hence also the need for more detailed research at national level; the Religion and Society Programme made an important preliminary contribution in this respect. Further, there is an urgent need for investment in RE, as other research (e.g. Jackson et al. 2010; Conroy et al. 2012) and the report on RE by the government’s Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted 2010) revealed: there are varying degrees of

quality of RE teaching, which is in turn related to issues of resourcing and teacher training.

The articles in this issue

As mentioned, the present issue of the *Journal of Beliefs and Values* includes a selection of the papers presented at the conference and an additional article by Leslie J. Francis and colleagues. The articles mainly follow the organising principle of the conference, with the findings from the two large Programme projects forming the core. Thus, three papers report on the Warwick project on ‘Young People’s Attitudes to Religious Diversity’, with Julia Ipgrave’s article focusing on the relationships between local patterns of religious practice and young people’s attitudes to the religiosity of their peers, based on qualitative data from the project, and Leslie J. Francis and colleagues focusing on the quantitative data in two articles, providing the theoretical approaches to the project in the first and presenting data analysis on religious diversity, empathy, and God in the second. Olga Schihalejev’s response to Ipgrave thoughtfully draws out wider implications of this material for research on religion.

The next two articles present findings and methodological approaches of the Glasgow-based project on ‘Does Religious Education Work?’. The first, by James Conroy, David Lundie, and Vivienne Baumfield exemplifies how failures of meaning occur in current RE teaching, drawing attention to the ways in which content, teaching, and examination-related issues interact. The second article, by David Lundie and James Conroy, discusses the ‘forum theatre approach’ in eliciting ethnographic evidence in this study. Christina Osbeck’s considered response to the first article provides a critical reflection on ‘failures of meaning’ in the RE context, adducing other research to shed further light on the notion of meaning.

The following articles draw on ethnographic or survey data which illuminate aspects of RE teaching, the role of RE teachers for young people or the formative influence of school or youth work in the formation of young people's religious identities. Judith Everington explores how beginning teachers use their personal life knowledge in the RE classroom and discusses the positive and negative aspects of doing this. Jenny Berglund extracts the standing of teachers in Muslim pupils' eyes from quantitative data, finding that young Muslims in Sweden entrust teachers with personal issues and problems, as they do parents and God. Jasjit Singh interrogates his interviews with older young British Sikhs to find how school and RE contributed to their sense of being nurtured in their religion, while Naomi Stanton focuses on Christian youth work, arguing that its different settings involve different sets of young people and thus fulfil different kinds of social needs. Taking a similar approach to Jasjit Singh, Sarah-Jane Page and Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip take the retrospective look of their interviewees— young adults—to explore how the prevailing religious and sexual cultures of their schools shaped their identities and attitudes.

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Notes

ⁱ Further details about the conference, including the programme and a conference report, are available on the WRERU web site: <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/WRERU>

ⁱⁱ Further details about the range of projects and activities within the Programme can be found at its web site: <http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/>

ⁱⁱⁱ The REDCo (Religion, Education, Dialogue, Conflict) Project was a three-year (2006–2009) European Commission Framework 6 project, involving a consortium of scholars from nine European universities and qualitative and quantitative studies both across and within participating countries. Further details can be found at: <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/WRERU>