

## **Religious Literacy**

### **A submission to the All Party Parliamentary Group**

**By Andrew Symes, Executive Secretary, Anglican Mainstream<sup>1</sup>**

1. What you understand 'Religious Literacy' to mean?

Religious literacy (RL) means an understanding of the basic tenets of religious belief in general and the main world faiths in particular, including an appreciation of some of the variations and even conflicts within religions. It also involves an appreciation of the effects religion can have on individuals and communities, and how religion produces wider social, philosophical, cultural and political expressions. 'Religion' has usually been defined as relating to the spiritual/metaphysical aspect of life and specifically to the idea of 'god'. Some argue that this could be widened to include fundamental concepts of reality; worldview.

2. The ways in which Religious Literacy enriches the lives of individuals and positively affects their engagement with their local community, society and public life.

Religious literacy enables people of different faiths and none, and even those within different traditions of the same faith, to understand one another and to find common ground. It also should help to keep conflict on the level of debate around ideas rather than discrimination or violence against people. There are many contemporary examples of a lack of religious literacy leading to serious misunderstanding, unwarranted accusations and even injustice.

For example when Tim Farron became leader of the Liberal Democrats, he was subjected to hostile questioning on the Radio 4 Today programme about the way that his faith might lead him to make 'irrational' decisions. A religiously literate person would know that religious belief and reason are not necessarily antagonistic, and that in fact many of the assumptions of modern science and (for example) justice rest on rational thinking that developed from monotheism.

The Church of England Communications Officer Arun Arora had to defend his decision to tweet an encouragement to pray for atheist Richard Dawkins who was ill at the time, because it was assumed that as Dawkins was a professed enemy of Christianity, the Church would be hostile to him, and so such a call to prayer must have been a sarcastic attack. A religiously literate person would know that Jesus'

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<sup>1</sup> Anglican Mainstream is a small independent charity seeking to support and commend orthodox Christian thinking about key issues facing church and society, through information sharing ([anglicanmainstream.org](http://anglicanmainstream.org)), networking and advocacy. [asymes@anglican-mainstream.net](mailto:asymes@anglican-mainstream.net); 01865 883388

command to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” is a basic staple of Christian ethics.

These two examples can also be viewed positively, to show how religious literacy can help. Politicians with faith will be seen as those bringing a different and helpful perspective rather than being viewed with suspicion and disdain. Religious perspectives on challenging and overcoming the selfish impulses of human nature might be appreciated more. RL shows how religious people have ethical guidelines which they live by, yet this does not mean that they are necessarily hostile to, and cannot respect, those with different beliefs and guidelines.

RL ensures the ability to live together with respect in a plural society. Also it ensures a level playing field: there is no such thing as a higher, neutral position from which religions can be judged. All faiths and worldviews have their axioms and assumptions which in a plural society should all be open to scrutiny, respectful discussion, challenge. RL ensures that we all understand these assumptions, unconscious and conscious in ourselves as well as in others.

3. How people learn to be religiously literate through school based education, out-of-school activities, the local community, lifelong learning, media and literature, workplace training schemes and other means

There are some very good examples of religious education in these sectors. However there are also major problems with the way religion is taught in schools and through the media:

- a) Religion is often taught (for example in Primary School) from the point of view of a superior observer looking in on various religious festivals and basic beliefs, which are viewed condescendingly as odd and irrelevant, similar to how Victorian anthropologists observed the rituals of primitive tribes (the ‘phenomenological’ approach).
- b) Religion is often taught from the point of view of secular humanism, with no recognition that this is an anti-religious worldview and so is inherently biased against religion. Also, many who claim to have no religion have beliefs and assumptions which are themselves worthy of observation from another, explicitly religious perspective.

4. How the development of Religious Literacy in children could be improved within the school context

The best ways to obtain religious literacy are a) to have some familiarity with the foundational texts of religions and the expressions of faith as practiced today b) to experience worship and community living in a faith context c) to have the chance to

interact with practising member of a faith community. d) to compare and contrast the teachings of different faiths and worldviews including secular humanism.

Schools should ensure that young people are exposed to these four areas, prioritising Christianity because this is the foundation of British culture. Schools should avoid, if possible:

- text books which blandly summarise a religious belief system without enabling students to interact with sacred Scriptures directly
- courses of 'Religious Education' which involve discussion of moral issues with little or no religious content
- 'multi-faith worship' which tries to blend all religions into one.

For example, Alan Brine, summarising and commenting on<sup>2</sup> a recent Harvard publication,<sup>3</sup> says "it is possible to diminish religious illiteracy by teaching about religion from an academic, non-devotional perspective". However it may be that such a perspective is part of the problem: it will result in religion being seen as tedious and irrelevant. Rather the best RE needs to make religion so interesting and alive that people might be open to change their worldview and/or religion, which should not be discouraged in a free society.

The background of the young people also needs to be taken into account. They will already be divided on the relevance of religion, how fashionable it is to show an interest in it, and the attitudes of their parents which will determine their level religious literacy/ignorance which may vary widely within the same class.

5. How the development of Religious Literacy in adults could be improved in formalised education settings such as universities, adult education and workplace training schemes

Very often these schemes (like school text books) are designed by "RE Experts": people who are interested in religion but have no personal commitment to faith (see the above comment on the 'academic, non-devotional' perspective). The portrayal of religions by such schemes then bear little similarity to faith that is actually believed and practiced in local communities. The result is low levels of enthusiasm or interest, and worse, prejudice against all religion.

The Government's Prevent Strategy and other similar schemes might exacerbate these dangers, by seeking to domesticate religion and stifle understanding and debate particularly about those aspects of religious belief which might be

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.reonline.org.uk/news/religious-literacy-the-irony-of-transatlantic-perspectives/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/publications/guidelines-teaching-about-religion-k-12-public-schools-united-states>

considered 'extreme' or contrary to 'British values'. The oft used word 'tolerance' has come to mean adherence to liberal Western cultural values and intolerance of deviation from this norm – it should mean the ability to graciously allow another person to hold a different point of view from one's own; and to be able to respectfully analyse and debate those views.

One possible solution is to ensure (as is supposed to happen in the SACRE boards) that 'conservative' religious leaders and regular worshippers are encouraged to make a contribution to such schemes, either in designing courses, giving talks or answering questions, rather than just liberal academics and civil servants.

6. How the development of Religious Literacy in people of all ages could be improved in settings which are not be considered formal education, such as the local community, out-of-school activities, sports teams, media and literature and other means.

The concept of 'offense' has had a chilling effect on informal religious education and literacy. Posters with Bible verses are taken down, street preachers are arrested, employees talking about their faith at work are disciplined, religious speakers are 'no-platformed' at Universities. The law is too often seen to be policing ideas and feelings, and ignoring genuine incitement to violence – it should be the other way round. Until these restrictions on free speech are removed, there can be no real progress in genuine religious literacy, understanding and mutual tolerance which must allow for the free exchange of ideas.

So for example, if a Christian says "I don't agree with gay marriage", or a Muslim says "women should cover their heads in public", they can be strongly challenged (not 'trolled' or arrested) on why they believe this and how these views are compatible with respect and legal rights for women and gay people. But at the same time, those who challenge them can in turn be questioned: "what do you worship? where do you get your values from?" If the purpose of religious education, formal or informal, is seen as making conservatives more liberal and leaving liberals unchallenged, those who hold conservative religious views will feel intimidated or disrespected, and will opt out, in some cases creating communities increasingly less integrated with the nation as a whole. Meanwhile the more secular minded people will remain largely illiterate in terms of religion.

Andrew Symes, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2016