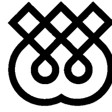

The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Agreed Syllabi and Un-agreed Values: Religious Education and Missed Opportunities for Fostering Social Cohesion
Farid Panjwani

Introduction

Think of a plural society not as one in which there is Babel of conflicting languages, but rather as one in which we each have to be bilingual. There is a first and public language of citizenship which we have to learn if we are to live together. And there is a variety of second languages which connect us to our local framework of relationship: to family and group and traditions that underlie them (Jonathan Sacks, 1991, p. 66).

A multi-cultural society demands multi-lingual capacities. Both the intense multi-cultural context in which increasing numbers of people are living today and its demand for multi-linguality are in many respects new developments. While the pluralist nature of societies, both in the past and today, is undeniable, historically, barring some exceptions, this fact was deemed undesirable. The Medieval Christian notions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, distinguishing between the "proper" and "heretical", imply this. Similarly, in the history of Muslims, while there was an acknowledgment of diverse beliefs, people generally sought the one "true" belief. In most contexts, up until recently, monism, rather than pluralism was the cherished value (Berlin, 1998).

Pluralism, a positive attitude towards diversity, becomes important in a world where there is a constant encounter with and exposure to "the others" who cannot be ignored, obliterated or assimilated. A host of developments in modern times, entailing heightened interactions among cultures, have led to political, cultural and social conditions that have made pluralism a positive value in many contexts. It exists alongside other values: some of which, such as monism, may be incompatible with it; others, such as tolerance, reinforce it; while still others, such as the desire to maintain group identity, may exist in tension with it.

Social cohesion in a multi-cultural society demands taking account of the juxtaposition of a historically informed fear of diversity and its contemporary embrace. Is this possible? Berlin points out that,

> If I am a man or a woman with sufficient imagination, I can enter into a value system which is not my own, but which is nevertheless something I can conceive of men pursuing while remaining human, while remaining creatures with whom I can communicate, with whom I have some common values – for all human beings must have some common values or they cease to be human, and also some different values else they cease to differ, as in fact they do. (Berlin, 1998)

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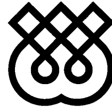


The realisation of the possibility articulated by Berlin is indeed one of our key challenges today. It entails a dynamic balance between respecting diversity and finding common vocabulary and purpose. Achieving it is neither simple nor uncontested, but not impossible. Sacks' recommendation above is part of an emerging discourse on how to meet this challenge.

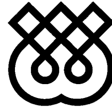
For obvious reasons, education has been a very important site for the debates concerning social cohesion in a plural society. In the British context, Hargreaves, for example, has observed that "the problem of Britain as a pluralist society is how to find some social cement to ensure that people with different moral, religious, and ethical values as well as social, cultural and linguistic traditions can live together with a degree of harmony; and to discover the contribution that the education system should play in generating social cohesion" (1994, p. 31). The central concern of this paper is to explore the contribution that education about religion (generally put under the term religious education or RE) can make to foster social cohesion in a multi-religious society such as Britain. That RE should foster social cohesion is hardly contested. Whether it does so, to what extent, and how, is rarely agreed upon.

While the discussion may have a bearing on education about religion in various types of schools, the focus of the paper will be on community schools in England and Wales. The reason for this choice is that by law (Education Reform Act of 1988) community schools, unlike schools with religious character, are required to provide *education* about religion and not *instruction* in a religion.

It needs to be acknowledged that the goals, contents and position of RE are by no means self-evident (Wardekker and Miedema, 2001) and its very presence in community schools as a compulsory subject is a moot point (White, 2004; Wright, 2004). Yet, while this debate continues, students are being taught about religions and the situation is not likely to change overnight. This is not only because of the particular historical relationship between education and religion in Britain but also due to some current global trends. It has been argued that recent decades have witnessed a resurfacing of religion in the public domain across the globe; that we are witnessing a deepening of adherence to religious identity at a time when the increased interactions among religions has made the need for tolerance and pluralism extraordinarily crucial (Barber, 1995; Connolly, 1999; Sacks, 1991). Thus, pragmatically, the question of the relationship between RE and religious plurality needs to be addressed, regardless of one's stance on its compulsory nature.

On the one hand, there are those who consider the provision of RE in schools as necessary and beneficial to social cohesion in a plural society (Cooling, 1997; Dennett, 1988; Jackson, 1997) and on the other hand there are those who consider it to be unnecessary and possibly harmful for such cohesion (Hargreaves, 1994; Humanist Philosopher's Group, 2001; White, 2004). The responses and counter-responses to David Bell's call to faith schools, particularly Muslim schools, to "adapt their curriculum to ensure that it ... helps them [pupils] to acquire an appreciation of and respect for other cultures" is amongst the latest episodes in this long running debate (Bell, 2005).

This paper takes the view that RE (or education about religion, as it should be called) can indeed play a very important role in promoting social cohesion, particularly so in a world where religious identities are increasingly becoming important. However, it is argued, the potential of RE to do so is being realised only partly. The most important reason for this is that the content of RE has not received the educational attention it deserves. Using the outcomes of a case study about the portrayal of Islam (or, more accurately, of the histories and cultures of Muslims) in RE textbooks



and syllabi, this paper will: demonstrate the consequences of this lack of attention to the content; argue that immense opportunities for promoting social cohesion are offered by an alternative approach; explore the reasons why the alternative is not being considered; and recommend a way forward.

Realising RE's Potential: The Case of the Teaching of Islam

A small study of selected agreed syllabi and textbooks on Islam was undertaken in 2005, where five syllabi (Surrey, Kensington & Chelsea, Hackney, Somerset and Lewisham) and six books (Cooper, 2004; Egan, 2002; Husain, 1996; Knight, 1995; Maqsood, 1995; Thompson, 1996) were randomly selected and reviewed. It should be noted that although the authors of most of the textbooks appear to be non-Muslims (as suggested by their names) there are often Muslim consultants who work with them. While the study is not representative, it does reflect how Islam is being presented to a large number of pupils: the local education authorities selected are very different from each other, some with very large Muslim populations; and the books chosen are among the most popular textbooks on Islam at the school level.

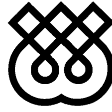
The following is a discussion on how the faith, histories and cultures of Muslims are currently presented in the textbooks and syllabi being used in many classrooms in England. Simultaneously, the gap between what is being presented and what indeed are the realities of Muslims in the past and the present will be discussed. To do this, the study has drawn upon the scholarship on the histories and cultures of Muslims carried out in modern scholarship by Muslims as well as others.

Monolithic versus Pluralist Presentation

One of the most significant findings of scholarship on the history of Muslim societies is that they are immensely diverse and have been so since their earliest days (Faruqi and Faruqi, 1986). How do the textbooks and syllabi fare in terms of bringing out this diversity?

With some exceptions, the syllabi and the books studied fail to portray the rich internal diversity among Muslims. More specifically, they reflect the current mainstream Sunni understanding of Islam and as a result present Islam as a monolithic faith. Some examples are considered below.

The first pertains to the discussion of the sources of authority in Muslim history. The syllabi and books mention two sources of authority: the Qur'an and the words and deeds of Prophet Muhammad. These two in fact form the basic sources of authority for all Muslims. However, not all Muslims accept only these two sources of authority. The Shi'as, who make up ten to fifteen per cent of Muslims, consider the Imam, from the family of the Prophet, as another source of authority. In fact, the divide between the Sunnis and the Shi'as took place originally on the question of religio-political authority. In this regard, the Qur'anic reference to '*uli 'l-amr minkum'* (4:59) (meaning: "those who hold authority among you"), has been interpreted variedly in Muslim history: the Sunnis generally take it to refer to worldly leaders while the Shi'as understand it to refer to divinely designated Imams. The Shi'a believe that the Prophet, in line with the above noted Qur'anic injunction, appointed Imam Ali, his cousin and son-in-law, to be the leader of Muslims after his death. The Sunnis, on the other hand, claim that the Prophet did not appoint a successor and that it was up to the community to choose a leader for itself. Furthermore, in the Shi'a context, there is a close link between the Imam and the authority of the Prophet. This is because only those sayings of the Prophet, known as *Hadiths,* which are attested



to by the Shi‘a Imams are accepted as genuine or authentic (Newman, 2000). Only one syllabus (Somerset) mentions the Shi‘a interpretation of the notion of Imam; the rest simply assume a Sunni understanding and use the word Imam to refer to the prayer leader of the mosque. The Shi‘as are not the only group that have additional sources of authority. The Sufis have a system of authority that is based on teacher–disciple relationship (Schimmel, 1975). Thus, in reality, the institution of authority in Muslim contexts is a complex, multi-layered phenomenon, yet it is not presented in such a manner to students of RE.

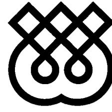
The discussion about the nature of the Qur’anic revelation is another example of the way in which Islam is presented as a monolithic faith. In almost all the books there are statements such as, “Muslims believe that Allah’s message was revealed to Muhammad, in Arabic, by the angel Jibril (Gabriel)” (Knight, 1995, p. 4). This is more a reflection of how many Muslims today think of the revelation; it is not a belief shared by all Muslims. There is a rich literature on the nature of revelation which shows that the positions on this matter vary from those who understand it to be a verbal transmission in Arabic from God through the angel to the Prophet, to those who believe revelation to be divine inspirations which travelled through the mind of the Prophet and emerged as the Qur’an (Rahman, 1966).

While the above two examples pertain to theology, the next two relate to culture. Here too we find a lack of appreciation of diversity. The architecture of the mosques around the world, for instance, is shaped by local cultural and environmental factors. Yet, except for a passing reference in one book to the fact that mosque architecture reflects local cultures (Cooper, 2004), mosques are always depicted as having a *minaret* and a dome. In fact, these two are by no means necessary features of a mosque. Around the world there are mosques that are based on local architectural traditions and artistic motifs. In my teaching, I often use a slideshow, developed by a Karachi-based architect, Mukhtar Husain, which portrays this rich architectural diversity of mosques. On viewing this, students, both Muslim and non-Muslim, are surprised that such a rich variety exists in mosque designs. Many Muslim students go through a phase of resistance before finally accepting buildings that look like Buddhist pagodas or Malian mud houses to be mosques. If the teaching of Islam does not make it easy for students to acknowledge that there are many accepted paths of interpretation in their own tradition, how much more difficult would it then be for them to recognise the possibility of diversity of other traditions?

The final example deals with a matter that is often at the forefront in media today. In most textbooks, Muslim women are shown wearing various kinds of *Hijab* (the term encompasses many items such as head scarves and veils). While the *Hijab* has been a significant part of women’s attire in Muslim contexts, it is by no means so widespread that almost all of the illustrations of women in all the textbooks ought to be portrayed wearing the *Hijab.* One author (Husain, 1996) labels a dress that hides a woman almost completely, including her face, a “strictly Islamic dress”. In fact, the opinions on the *Hijab* among Muslims are divided: there are those who reject any religious compulsion about dress, including the *Hijab,* instead pointing to the Qur’anic stress on personal modesty; others disagree on the scope of the term, namely, what parts of the body ought to be covered (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Shadid & Van Koningsveld, 2005).

Literalist versus Symbolic Understandings

One dimension of the internal diversity among Muslims is their varied approaches to religious texts and practices. Between those who seek literal meaning of and those who symbolise every religious text and practice, there is a rich spectrum of positions. The literal approaches alone are



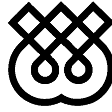
not only irreconcilable across religions but also place religious beliefs in direct confrontation with scientific and historic findings. A non-literal (cognitive or non-cognitive) approach to language use in religious contexts can expose pupils to the possibility of multiple interpretations without losing respect for their own interpretation. Is this variety reflected in the presentation of Islam in schools?

Unfortunately, the syllabi and textbooks examined portray only, or mainly, a literalist understanding of various ideas associated with Muslim beliefs and practices. For instance, angels are defined as "intelligent beings who have specific tasks and duties to perform". Apart from the unmistakeable modern-day bureaucratic parallels, such literalist presentations obliterate other Sufi, Sunni, Shi'a and philosophical understandings which do not see angels as physical entities. Muslim philosophers, for example, understood angels (*malaika,* in Arabic) as spiritual beings and Sufis often associated angels with human reason (Schimmel, 1993).

Descriptions of the notion of the hereafter in Muslim contexts are another example of the literalist approach. A physical notion of heaven and hell is predominant in syllabi and textbooks. This, of course, is not the only way in which the descriptions of the hereafter were understood in Muslim history. In his *Risalat al-Ghufran* (Epistle of Salvation), Abu Alaa al-Maari (d. 1057), the famous Syrian poet, in fact makes fun of those who understand heaven and hell in a physical sense, taking the relevant Qur'anic verses literally. In only one textbook is the possibility of a symbolic understanding mentioned: "All the descriptions of the after-life, including such things as youth, beauty, dress, food, and so on are intended to be understood symbolically since in eternal life the faithful are not subjected to physical limitations at all" (Maqsood, 1995, p. 43). Similarly, descriptions of *Mi'raj,* the event marking the ascent of Prophet Muhammad from Makkah Jerusalem and then to heaven, are also presented as a physical occurrence. Again, Maqsood is the only writer who at least acknowledges the possibility of a symbolic interpretation: she notes that the event of The Night of Ascent "was a miraculous journey, it is not clear whether the event was supposed to have really happened physically, or was a vision" (p. 14). Muslims, in fact, have understood the event in many different ways. For instance, *Mi'raj* has been seen as a symbol of the highest spiritual experience attainable not only by the Prophet but by others as well (Schimmel, 1993).

The literalist approach is so prevalent in textbooks on Islam that one author claims that "Muslims feel little need for symbols in their religion" (Egan, 2002, p. 16). In the teacher's guide, the author first writes that, "The use of signs and symbols plays an important role in the everyday lives of most people. This is especially true of most religious people." He then goes on to say that, "Islam as a religion has little need of symbols. This is because Muslims are happy to fulfil their duty by submitting themselves to the will of Allah and trusting him alone." While many Muslims today may agree with this statement, the historical fact is that symbolic approaches have always been an important part of Muslim understanding. Some Sufis have gone so far as to claim that the entire universe is nothing but a symbol pointing to the "really real", that is, Allah. Even rituals were often understood symbolically. An eleventh century Persian poet, Nasir Khusraw, for instance, recounts in a poem his meeting with a returning pilgrim. While the pilgrim tells of the rituals he performed in Hajj, Khusraw asks him if the rituals had any personal meaning and esoteric significance for him:

> I said to him, "When you were throwing stones at the accused demon,
> Did you throw out of yourself
> All blameworthy habits and actions?"



He said, “No.” I said to him, “When you went to pray at the station of Abraham,
Did you surrender your inner self to God, in truth, faith and utter certitude?”
He said, “No.”
…
Then I said, “In that case, my friend, you have made no hajj,
You have not become a dweller in the station of self-effacement,
You have merely gone to Makkah, seen it, and come back.” (quoted in Hunsberger, 2000)

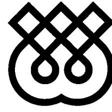
Historical/humanist versus Absolutist Approach

Religions are not fixed and static entities: “One of the important insights that have emerged from the study of religion as a historical and cultural reality is the realisation that religions change; they are not timeless, eternal essences” (Ernst, 2003, p. 50). The meanings religious people give to their practices, values, norms and institutions are the result of the creative and dialectic relationship between them and their environment. The increasing activities in areas such as inter-faith dialogues are clear indicators that, as always, religions are on the move. Do we find this historically informed approach to religious ideas, institutions, and practices in the textbooks and syllabi?

The picture, sadly, is unimpressive. Many of the examples given above are pertinent here. I will thus provide one more example. Almost all the syllabi and books discuss “Islamic” law. The Arabic term used for it is *Shariah*. This is unhistorical. The *Shariah* refers to an attitude towards life based on ethical ideals. The appropriate term for law in historical Muslim contexts is *fiqh*. Nevertheless, what is today called *Shariah* evolved over several centuries. While the Qur’an and the model of the Prophet provided the main sources of law, for the Sunni Muslims at least, local practices, common sense and public good all had their share in its evolution (Rahman, 1966). This historical process is hardly present in textbooks, resulting in an essentialised notion of law. In modern period, the question of the status of *Shariah* has been passionately debated. Yet, only Maqsood (1995) refers to the different contemporary positions of reformers, traditionalists and radicals on the relevance of *Shariah* today. But, neither she nor any other writer discusses the historical evolution of law in Muslim contexts. If students are unfamiliar with the historical nature of *Shariah* and the contemporary debates concerning its significance, they cannot be blamed for thinking that its teachings are eternal, leading to difficulties in reconciling tradition with the demands of the ever-changing human condition.

The lack of a historical approach in textbooks leads to the oversight of an important contribution that RE could make to combating stereotypes and strangeness associated with “the other” by “throwing into relief the interconnections, the socio-cultural exchanges, and the mutual influence” across the cultures spawned by the Muslim, Jewish and Christian people (Kaul-Seidman *et al.,* 2003). One well known example of such exchanges, though hardly mentioned in school books, is the intellectual traffic from Greece to Baghdad and Cordoba, and from there to Toledo (Fakhry, 1997). Such exchanges show that in their own traditions, people were grappling ultimately with human concerns. Diversity of images of afterlife across religions, underpinned by shared existential concerns is another example of the universalistic dimension underlying particular religious traditions (MacGregor, 1992).

While there is no dearth of humanistic trends in the histories of Muslims, they are hard to find in the textbooks. In this regard, a significant omission, conspicuous given the much emphasised



notion of spiritual development in RE (QCA, 2000; Thatcher, 1999), is the discussion of mysticism or Sufism, as it is called in Muslim contexts. Hardly any textbook gives these traditions the attention they deserve. As in other mystical traditions, Sufis had an approach to religion that stressed its inner spiritual dimension rather than the physical acts, doctrines and rituals. A poem like Rumi's, *The Reed Song,* can thus speak to people across religious traditions:

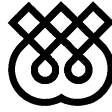
> Listen to the reed,
> how it tells a tale
> complaining of separation:
> Ever since I was parted from the reed-bed,
> my lament has made
> men and women weep.
> I search for a heart
> smitten by separation that I may tell the pain
> of love-desire.
> Everyone who has got far from his source
> harks back for the time
> when he was one with it.
> (Jalaluddin Rumi, d. 1273)

Exploration of Sufi approaches could help students realise that they can reach out to other faiths without betraying their sense of belonging to their own tradition.

Finally, in contemporary plural societies, it is essential that students should appreciate that "whilst a moral stance may be, and frequently is, grounded in religious belief, moral and civic values are just as important and tenable in the absence of religious belief" (Hargreaves, 1994). Unfortunately, the current content of RE does not bring out this humanistic stance towards ethics. Rather, it seeks to reinforce the link between religion and morality. Yet this is not how it has to be. Within Muslim history there was a strong theological school known as the *Mu'tazila* as well as a stream of philosophers who indeed approached ethics in a humanistic perspective. From the late eighth to the twelfth century, there were many theologians and philosophers who argued that right and wrong can be known through human reason, a position sometimes called the Natural Law theory of ethics. Their position is very similar to those of Maimonides (d. 1204) in the Jewish tradition and Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) in the Christian tradition. Thus, in both spirituality and ethics, there are strong humanistic trends in Muslim history, but which the current RE content fails to capitalise on.

An arresting observation emerging from the above analysis is the huge divergence between what is presented in syllabi and textbooks as Islam and Muslim belief and practices, and what in fact is the history and current reality of Muslims. The presentation of an historically defensible portrayal of Muslim past, it is proposed, has the potential to help students appreciate that as they learn what Sacks calls "first and public language" they can find its resonance in the second languages of their own traditions: that respect for difference, change and dialogue are features that are part of their own tradition, and that they do not betray their identity if they respect or even admire other faiths and cultures, for this ability itself is a characteristic of their own tradition. It is this opportunity that is being missed in RE today.

Why? And, what can be done to change the situation?



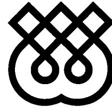
Politicisation of RE Content

RE is currently taught in all schools in England and Wales. In the last century, the two most important pieces of legislation concerning RE were promulgated in 1944 and 1988. The first one paved the way for transforming RE in community schools (and some Church schools) both in terms of approach and content (Cush, 1998). In the second of these Acts, overt Christian aims "gave way to more general aims that stressed the importance of religion as a factor in understanding culture or in helping young people to find their own meaning in life" (Barnes and Kay, 2002). The move in fact was an acknowledgement of important socio-religious trends that were taking place in the broader context of changes since 1945: the large scale arrival of immigrants, recasting British society into a multi-religious mould; the decline in religious practice, particularly church attendance (Kay, 1997); and new findings within educational psychology that challenged the traditional approach to RE (Goldman, 1965). Today, while most schools of religious character are allowed to have a confessional approach to RE, community schools are legally required to offer non-confessional RE.

However, the trend has not been without complications. The community schools, while required to provide a non-confessional religious education, are also obliged by law to have "collective worship" or "school prayers" that is confessional in nature. Further, RE is not part of the National Curriculum and its curriculum is developed in a manner different from that of other subjects. The syllabus is arrived at by taking account of the religious views of the local population (DFE, 1994). Under the 1988 educational legislation, each local educational authority is required to establish a Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) to advise in the evolution of an "Agreed Syllabus". SACRE includes members of the local religious communities. This has in fact made the ownership of RE content "a struggle between educationalists and faith communities (usually meaning religious and community leaders), with SCAA Model Syllabuses a victory for the latter" (Ipgrave, 1998). SACRE members representing religious communities, owing in part to the consensual approach to decision making, have an influential, and sometimes decisive, say in the formulation of the content of RE, thus leading to the blurring of distinctions between instructional and educational approaches.

Thus "an emphasis has clearly been on respecting the wishes of parents (and of others, such as Church leaders) to initiate children into communities of faith - or not" (Bowker, 1996). This view was also expressed by Grimmet when he noted that governments (both Conservative and Labour) have "little belief in RE's personal and community value other than as a means of appeasing the faith communities and maintaining the concordat between state and church which has been reflected in all educational legislation since 1870" (Grimmet, 2000, p. 11). The situation remains largely unchanged in the new National Framework for RE.

Religious communities practise religion; they embody how religion is understood and lived at a particular time, and place. Thus they reflect *an* authentic perspective. A child growing up in the community rightly receives this perspective. The well-known Interpretive Approach to RE adopted in the Warwick RE Project, aimed to study and present religion authentically by studying its practice in the actual lives of families and individuals (Jackson, 1997). It rightly saw the practice and understanding of religions in religious communities as authentic. Its main weakness, however, was that it took only one particular time and context as authentic and did not take a historical perspective. What is required in religious *education,* in making students "religiously literate" (Wright, 2004), is not simply an exposure to how a religion is understood and practised at a given time, but an understanding of a religious belief and its practices over its history. A



sound historical approach would take full account of the beliefs and practices of communities. However, it would do this throughout the history of the tradition.

As part of the case study above, it was mentioned that a strand of ethical thought exists within Muslim history that saw ethics as objective in character and discernable through human reason without the aid of revelation. This strand, as noted above, was represented by the *Mu'tazila* as well as several Muslim philosophers. Today, however, neither the *Mu'tazila* nor the philosophers are part of the general Muslim consciousness and one has to approach scholarly works on Islam to learn about them (Fakhry, 1997; Sharif, 1963-66). It is thus not likely that a syllabus designed through the consensus of religious communities will reflect such points of view. This is where "the particular skills and understanding that religious studies can bring to religious education have not been fully explored or developed in the context of the school curriculum", leaving it vulnerable to powerful criticism (Baumfield, 2004). Though this paper has focused on the teaching of Islam, similar questions about the content of RE are being raised about other religions as well (Doble, 2005).

What has been the dominant response of the RE professionals to this politicisation of content? Many appear to have adjusted to it and have consequently focused more on pedagogy of RE than the content. Furthermore, the RE content, given that it is based on the community's self-perception, which often sees openness to other religious traditions as fraught with dangers, seeks to highlight the unique and distinctive within each tradition. This has contributed to RE's stress on diversity and difference, often at the cost of under-stressing the commonalities. However, as noted above, social cohesion in a plural society needs simultaneous recognition of differences and commonalities. Thus, both these responses - excessive focus of pedagogy and diversity - need to be reconsidered.

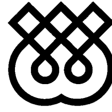
RE's Emphasis on Pedagogy and Diversity

Proponents of RE as a contributor to social cohesion have argued that it does so through several means. Firstly, by helping pupils develop skills to analyse situations and to engage in open-minded discussions, RE fosters attitudes that are necessary for negotiations in a pluralist society. Secondly, by exposing students to more than one religion, RE facilitates mutual understanding and promotes respect and tolerance. Thirdly, RE provides opportunities to reflect upon existential questions and limit-situations that concern all human beings and are claimed to be at the foundations of religions.

It is to be noted that these arguments are pedagogical in nature. In fact, pedagogy rather than content appears to be the centre of attention in the recent discourse on RE. The stance of Baumfield (2003) that the "key issue is not so much *what* we should teach as *how* we should teach RE' is typical in this regard (p. 174).

An analysis of several issues of the *British Journal of Religious Education* (BJRE), a leading RE journal of Europe, was carried out to assess the emphasis given to various aspects of RE. The journals studied were from 1998 to 2005. A total of 96 articles were considered. Drawing upon a similar work by English *et al.* (2003), the articles were divided into the following themes:

- Models and methods
- Educational theory
- RE and social plurality



- Policy and administration
- Classroom experiences
- Denominational RE
- Content of RE in schools
- Others (Analysis of BJRE, relationship between RE and Religious Studies)

It was found that about a third of the articles were on theory, whether curricular or pedagogical. Next in number were the articles concerning models and methods pertaining to research on RE. There were only eight articles that were concerned in any substantial manner with the content of RE in schools. For example, Homan (2000) deals with the use of artefacts in RE classrooms. Similarly, Bauser and Poole (2002) explore the presentation of the relationship between science and religion in the RE curriculum.

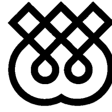
Perhaps one of the reasons RE teaching remains much weaker than in other humanities subjects (Ofsted, 2003) has to do with the fact that the pedagogy and content of RE have different philosophical underpinnings; the former seeking to promote openness towards diversity and the latter trying to satisfy religious communities.

The other response to the politicisation of content has been to stress distinctiveness of religious traditions. The need to recognise and appreciate difference is undeniable. However, some authors such as Watson (2004) see this to be an end in itself, claiming that the distinctiveness of RE *vis-a-vis* other subjects like citizenship education lies in its celebration of diversity and encouragement of dialogue. Such claims raise the question about the premises of the dialogue. It may be argued that common procedural values are a crucial pre-requisite to meaningful dialogue. To view the celebration of difference as an end in itself may be regarded as politically correct; in practice, however, it is debatable whether this is either possible or desirable.

Groups in society, whether religious or other, are different not only in terms of the values they adhere to but also in terms of the resources, power and influence they have. Unless a society arrives at a consensus on its basic procedural values through which it can negotiate differences and interests, there is a constant threat that the most politically and/or economically dominant group may impose its values on others. Procedural values provide safeguards to all, most of all to the least powerful. The challenge is how to arrive at them.

Some of the greatest contemporary political thinkers have struggled with this question (Habermas, 1970; Rawls, 1999; Taylor, 1994). The Parekh Report argues for values such as "people's willingness to give reasons for their views, readiness to be influenced by better arguments than their own, tolerance, mutual respect, aspiration to peaceful resolution of differences, and willingness to abide by collectively binding decisions that have been reached by the agreed procedures" as preconditions for democratic dialogue (Runnymede Trust, 2000).

The argument can be taken a step further towards the need for agreement on common substantial values as well. Recent works in anthropology and psychology have argued for reconsidering the place of human universals in social as well as ethical spheres (Brown, 1991; Haidt and Joseph, 2004). "When we look closely at the daily lives of people in divergent cultures, we can find elements that arise in nearly all of them–for example, reciprocity, loyalty, respect for (some) authority, limits on physical harm, and regulation of eating and sexuality" (Haidt and Joseph, p. 55). Whether caused by physical needs of survival or by innate structures of the brain, we are heir to both human differences and universals. When one thinks about one's close friends, one may



note that they are apparently very different to oneself. However, no two individuals are the same. What enables some interactions to become friendships while others remain at lesser levels of interaction? Without ruling out the complexities involved, it is proposed that close relations are marked not only by the differences but also by a sense, even an inarticulate one, of the commonalities. It is this deeper unity that allows for a comfortable co-existence with differences at other levels. The line between difference as a source of strength and as a source of conflict is very thin. Fruitful co-existence needs an appreciation that beneath the differences, there are commonalities.

Historically, belief systems, language, blood relations, colour or ideology have provided this sense of deeper 'metaphysical' unity across divisions. Today, while they continue to be important unifying bonds, increasingly, and rightly, they are being deemed as insufficient, and in some contexts detrimental. But, this only underlines the existence of and the need for human universals. To some, the notion of human rights provides such deeper unity. Others have sought to ground it in 'modularity of mind' (Fodor, 1983). Still others are not certain that we can find such a bond. Within the context of religious diversity, people have advocated a stress on spirituality rather than religiosity as a possible way forward. Perhaps we are living in a transitional phase where older bonds are not sufficient and new bonds have not yet emerged fully, but are needed. Thus, even though there may be some truth in the fashionable position that today we do not have common values, there are some procedural values on which many people agree and which have the potential to lead to the creation of a much needed set of common substantial values in due course. Although some may disagree, there is a strong case for the view that the celebration of difference should not be seen as an end in itself for RE. To appreciate difference, it must be transcended by a sense of deeper unity across cultures– a sense of human universals.

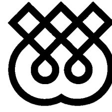
Conclusion

While the legal move from an essentially Christian instruction to a multi-religious education is nothing short of a paradigm shift, there is a need to make another shift. It is to adopt the educational spirit in the practice of RE as well, especially with regard to its content.

Increasingly, educators are noting the inherent tension implicit within the very phrase 'religious education' and are switching to alternative conceptions such as 'religion in education' and 'education about religion'. While this semantic shift is underway, it is argued that only when the actual content of RE reflects this change may the underlying tensions be overcome. As shown above, as far as the teaching of Islam is concerned, the content of RE is such that it leaves out much that ought to be part of 'education about religion' and includes much that should not be.

RE professionals must fight for an educational approach to the content of RE and must themselves give more attention to it.

An educationally sound content will highlight the internal diversity, dialogue and change within a religion. Thus, students would find that the languages they already belong to have deep links with the public language they need to learn. Such an approach will also bring out the symbolic and humanistic trends within religions, which can help them in both respecting as well as transcending differences across religions. The approach, in short, brings us back to Berlin's point, namely that of human beings having both common as well as different values because of which we can relate to people across cultures and societies.



Students need both, instruction and education in religion, but it is imperative to delineate the respective roles of families and communities and those of schools and other public spaces. While students should acquire "second languages ... in the context of families and communities" schools should be a place where they learn the first language of public and civic discourse. In fact, as far as community schools are concerned, it is suggested that the term 'religious education' be abandoned and replaced with 'education about religions'.

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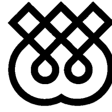

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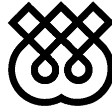

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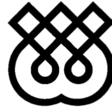

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