

Some Sort of Believer

A conversation in 2008

This interview with Robin Richardson was conducted in 2008 by Lat Blaylock, a national adviser on religious education, on behalf of the RE Today Magazine. It was subsequently slightly updated.

1. Why is Religious Education important at this time?

RE has the potential to develop skills of discernment – the ability to tell the difference between good religion and bad. Or, in different words, to agree with and act on those famous words once uttered by James Baldwin: “If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him.”

The same questions surround godlessness. Is atheism good for you, and for others, or not?

John Hull has said the two big dangers to avoid in religious education are, respectively, the formation of fans and the formation of fanatics.

We must try to avoid nurturing fans, John says – an uncritical adoration of one’s own gods, whoever or whatever they may happen to be, but also to avoid bringing forth fanatics, people so sure they’re right that they’re happy to destroy other people, and destroy even themselves as well.

One of Saul Bellow’s characters, I seem to remember, was writing a book entitled *Ten Ideas that Depopulated the World*. Young people and therefore their teachers need to be able to identify ideas that depopulate the world, namely fail to make us larger, freer and more loving. And also, course, ideas that are on the side of life, and love, and joy and survival, and hope.

By the way, toxic religious ideas can be active in chicken-and-egg relationships with socio-political contexts and conflicts. They generate and perpetuate destructive conflicts, yes, but also they can be used to justify hostilities that have other, more material, causes as well.

2. How do you see the relationships between RE and community cohesion?

The concept of cohesion was introduced into current policy discourse by the Parekh Report, *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*, in 2000. It was at first totally ignored by the government, but then gratefully accepted – though alas seriously re-interpreted. In its new interpretation, it was code for controlling Muslims, particularly Muslim youth. Teachers and others have valiantly resisted this interpretation and have rescued some of Parekh’s key points.

Knowing about other people's religions is a part of community cohesion. But knowing other people are human in a myriad of ways, as one is oneself, and have a stake in the same place as oneself (city, nation, planet), is even more important.

3. What in your own youth/childhood prepared you for the work you do? Inspired you?

I often wonder about this, but am not at all sure what the answer is. I think a key experience was going to live with a family in Germany when I was 16. I cannot remember why I wanted to go, or why my parents – who shared the anti-German prejudices of their generation – let me go. I couldn't speak a word of German when I arrived but was conversationally fluent when I returned home to Birmingham, and I was close to being a fan, to cite John Hull's word, of German literature, music, landscape and people. This expanded in due course into a sense that 'the Other' is not necessarily to be feared, nor is the experience of being a stranger, an outsider.

Through my teens and in my first year at university I had encounters with evangelical Christianity. I was still troubled by unhappy memories of this when I became a teacher. John Robinson's *Honest to God* was a thunderbolt for me in March (I think it was) 1963, showing that being some sort of a churchgoing believer, and having sympathy and even empathy towards secular humanism and its expressions in arts and literature, were not as irreconcilable as they had previously seemed.

In due course I was influenced by Zen Buddhism, and by so-called new age spirituality, and developments in science and theories of evolution, and movements around 'beyond theology' and 'beyond theism'.

A few weeks after the publication of *Honest to God*, if my memory is correct, I received a letter out of the blue from a total stranger inviting me to write an article about religious education for a little magazine he edited. I had never heard of him, or of it, but I jotted something.

The magazine was entitled *Learning for Living* and the editor was called Harold Loukes, and in the course of the following decade he had an enormous influence on me – his personality, his conversation, his writings, the things he asked or encouraged me to do. The article was entitled 'Leaving Out the Religious Bits'.

4. Government can seem instrumentalist in the way they seek to 'use' RE for tolerance. Is that an intolerable tension for an idealist (like you?) or a creative tension?

A leading question, I think! Yes, I am most of the time exasperated, or indeed sourly cynical and mocking, towards current government policies and discourse.

But I ought to discern, as you gently suggest, that mixed motives, anomalies, impurities and opportunism are not necessarily all bad, particularly since they are not all totally avoidable.

Over the last three or four years I have worked a great deal with central government (though not in relation to RE) and am deeply impressed by most of the civil servants I have met, and most of the rules and customs they live by.

5. As you see it, how has religion been changing shape and significance in education in the last decade? Positives and negatives?

I feel I do not know enough to be able to answer this.

6. You challenged us all to 'dare to be a teacher'. How does this challenge and speak to RE teachers today?

The daring, as ever, lies in dealing with questions, issues, paradoxes and uncertainties that politicians and the media would prefer to leave untouched.

And in engaging at the same time with the young, and with oneself.

27 October 2008, slightly updated some years later.

Later note: John Hull (1935-2015), mentioned in this interview, was a lecturer, professor and emeritus professor of religious education at the University of Birmingham. His journal *Learning for Living* in due course became the *British Journal of Religious Education*.