**Public Religion in an Age of Ambivalence: Recovering Religious Literacy after a Century of Secularism**

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This chapter explores the hypothesis that publics have lost their ability to talk well about religion after a century or so of secular assumptions. It considers two driving forces in this loss – a shift in welfare from churches to state, and a shift in school Religious Education which has tended to marginalise it and colonise it with proxies such as citizenship, cohesion and culture.

It goes on to suggest some ways in which education can—and should—move religion away from this state of affairs, and look at it instead as something far too pervasive, interesting, and nuanced to neglect or regard with ambivalence. Difficult thought the conversation about religion and belief may be, as David Ford puts it, money, sex and relationships can be difficult, but we do not stop talking about money, sex and relationships as a consequence (see Dinham and Francis 2015, forthcoming). So why should we do so about religion?

In their book, *Religion and Change in Modern Britain*, Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto write about:

…a characteristic assumption of the post war period: that religion has become a purely private matter with no public or political significance. So long as this idea prevailed, both in scholarship and in society, it was possible to treat religions as discrete entities which could be analysed solely in terms of their inner logics… (Woodhead and Catto 2012, 2)

They go on to say that religion is not an *aside* to economics, politics, media, the law “…and other arenas” (Ibid. 2012, 2) but is integral to them. I agree, and this chapter will explain how.

The chapter will eventually focus on the role of education—the central theme of this volume,—but it will do so by way of addressing welfare. Both are needed, and related, the chapter will argue, because welfare and education are two spheres which have most driven modern religious change and between them have got publics to where we are now. More than that, together they have left contemporary societies across the West with a serious problem: religious illiteracy.

**The Loss of Religious Literacy – why it matters**

There is an observation I have been making all my adult life—that contemporary British people are ambivalent at best about religion and belief. They are not sure what religion is, how much of it there is, what it looks like, what it is for, or what to do about it. That probably goes for most Europeans and for a great many North Americans and Australians too.

The question is, does this matter? The answer is absolutely yes, because scholars and politicians are realizing that religion and belief are everywhere. However, decades of relativistic, non-confessional religious education, and a shift in welfare from churches to states, have left religious language out of public talk for at least a generation. And now, when people do try to talk about them, they very often find they have largely lost the ability to do so. What tends to happen instead is a muddled conversation, often mired in anxiety about violence and sex, and leading to knee-jerk reactions. These focus on issues like the wearing of the veil; a case where a British Airlines employee was told she could not wear her cross to work, and took the airline to court and won[[1]](#footnote-1); and another where a Christian bed and breakfast owner refused to allow a gay couple to stay, and again this went to court.[[2]](#footnote-2) In this case the gay couple won. These are examples of public treatments of religion which tend to produce more heat than light. In short, on religion we find ourselves with a lamentable quality of conversation, just as we need it most. I am not going to suggest that the answer is a return to the past—more confessional religious education and church-based welfare services. Instead I am going to work towards an argument for religious literacy which recognizes a new religious landscape, and is relevant to all of us, whatever our own religious stance, or none. This chapter will do so in two parts. First, by addressing the question ‘how have we gotten here?’, and second, ‘what should we do?’ The first relates to welfare; the second to education.

**The Role of Welfare in the Loss of Religious Literacy**

So, how have we gotten here? The answer lies in part in the sphere of welfare and can be found in a three-part story of change. The first phase can be characterised as a willing transfer of welfare from church to state. This is very much a process, rather than a moment, though it crystallised quite quickly during and immediately after the Second World War. Welfare had already been high on the agenda of politicians and churchmen long before the 1940s (see Prochaska 1995). In the United Kingdom, a national insurance scheme already covered minimal payments during ill health and old age, designed to prevent the poorest falling entirely into destitution. The Elizabethan and then Victorian Poor Laws had attempted to address poverty centuries before that. A minimal safety net against poverty had gradually emerged.

In my ‘willing transfer’ argument, I consider how the idea of welfare took a very much more focused shape in this context. The first character in this story is William Temple, Bishop of Manchester, Archbishop of York (1929-42) and then of Canterbury, (1942-44), when he died prematurely. Temple is widely regarded as an intelligent and imaginative Christian of considerable vision (see Brown 2011) and he appeared able to command the attention of a broadly interested nation. This appears to be in striking contrast with contemporary publics, for whom religious authorities are almost certainly largely irrelevant, Temple set out a manifesto for welfare in a series of books and pamphlets. Notable among them was *Christianity and the State* (1928), in which he coined the term ‘welfare state’. He also wrote about church and stage in *Citizen and Churchman* in 1941, and then in *Christianity and Social Order*. This was published in 1942 by a famous popular British publisher, Penguin, and sold out (Timmins 2001, p23). Here, Temple asks such questions as ‘what right has the church to interfere?’; ‘how should the church interfere?’; ‘what are Christian social principles?’; and ‘what is the task before us?’. It is worthy of note that such questions were recognizable to a popular audience. To this he answers:

…the national debt will be a heavy burden…and there will be the need to reconstruct the devastated areas of many towns with all the adjustments of rights, vested interests and social welfare which any planning must involve…The structure of life as we knew it…has already been profoundly modified…How far do we want to restore it if we can? (Temple 1942, 84)

He goes on to explore what Christian thought might have to say, concluding that a number of pillars were in need of reconstitution. These included “the family as the primary social unit” (1942, 85)—for which he identifies houses as a key issue; the “sanctity of personality” (1942, 87)—for which he prescribes good health and education; and “the principle of fellowship” (1942, 90) for which he turns to the end of educational division and the maintenance of a Christian character in state education for all. The book goes on to argue for employment for all: “every citizen should be in secure possession of such an income as will enable him to maintain a home…” (1942, 99) he says, as well as liberty and leisure. In short he states “the aim of a Christian social order is the fullest possible development of individual personality in the widest and deepest possible fellowship” (1942, 100). In this way, Temple sets out both the approach and the content of the welfare state—a term he himself is first to use, and which subsequently captures the public imagination,.

Thus Temple draws on Christian faith to argue for the rethinking of the entire politics and practice of care. When linked with the other part of the story, its power begins to crystallise. This other part begins not with a churchman but with a politician: William Beveridge.

Beveridge and Temple had first met at Balliol College, Oxford, forty years earlier. Whilst at Oxford they spent time at Toynbee Hall in the Settlement Movement in the East End of London to “find friends among the poor, as well as finding out what poverty is and what can be done about it” (Sentamu 2009). Later, Beveridge came to be considered an authority on [unemployment insurance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unemployment_insurance) and in May 1941, the Minister of Health, [Ernest Brown](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Brown_(MP)), announced the formation of a committee of officials to survey existing social insurance and allied services, and to make recommendations. Beveridge was asked to chair this committee and it is said that this was expected to be an insignificant committee designed to distract Beveridge from his attempts to influence the development of new manpower policy, a subject on which he had reportedly made himself something of a bore. However, Beveridge used the Committee to publish “Social Insurance and Allied Services” (known as the Beveridge Report), a landmark in social policy which proposed that all people of working age should pay a weekly [national insurance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_insurance) contribution in return for entitlements to benefits ensuring a minimum standard of living. Beveridge argued that this system would provide a minimum standard of living “below which no one should be allowed to fall” (Beveridge 1942).

It also recommended that the government should find ways of fighting what he called the five ‘Giant Evils’ of Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness (Beveridge 1942, s.8). Beveridge also assumed in the report that there would be a National Health Service (NHS). The report had great impact and Beveridge’s arguments were widely accepted. Thus, when Clement Attlee became Prime Minister at the 1945 general election, he announced that the introduction of the Welfare State. Temple said of this that it was “the first time anyone had set out to embody the whole spirit of the Christian ethic in an Act of Parliament” (Sentamu 2009).

Thus, before 1948 welfare was almost entirely the province of the churches, in parishes and congregations. After the war, this shifted, in perception at least, to the State, On the upside, this transfer could be said to undo centuries of paternalism, sexism and top-down philanthropy,

challenging the randomness of welfare provision as it had bee done when in the hands of the parishes.

On the downside, the welfare transfer has been thought to have drastically loosened the connection between people and parish which had been the bedrock of communities. The connections which were lost have been agonized over by policy-makers ever since, in successive waves of anxiety about a crisis of community — from the Community Development Projects of the 1960s, to the New Deal for Communities in the 2000s.

But the reality of the welfare state has always been more mixed than it appeared. Faith groups have maintained a constant and consistent presence, often working in the most disadvantaged areas where all other agencies have withdrawn. I call this phenomena ‘invisible presence’: the willing transfer from church to state is *assumed* to have resulted in the secularization of welfare. Yet in fact, faiths continued to play a crucially important role, albeit one which was far less visible. But the impact is important nevertheless. Though welfare would not be done completely by the state, despite the rhetoric, nevertheless state forms and language had dominance when people talked about welfare. Secular welfare may have quietened faith-based care, but it had not stopped it. Nevertheless, its non-religious articulation appears as a significant force contributing to a widespread loss of ability to talk well about religion today.

The third phase of the story starts in 1979, when the first Thatcher government achieved power in the UK, This augured in a shift in Britain and America to “market led approaches in the 1980’s and early 1990’s” (Banks et al. 2003, 28). The idea was that the role of the state would be minimised in favour of non-government providers. This mixed economy of welfare had the accidental effect of readmitting faith providers in welfare spaces in highly visible ways. This has allowed faiths to practice visibly in at least four spheres of activity: as providers of services through small-scale, local community development projects; as providers of larger scale services, through public sector tendering for housing and major social care initiatives, as providers of strategic services such as brokering partnerships in to hard to reach communities, and networks, and as social enterprises.

Various reports by faith groups themselves claim a crucial contribution right across the UK in this period. As I have shown elsewhere (see Dinham 2009), in the South East, *Beyond Belief* (South East England Faith Forum March 2004) identifies at least two community action projects for each faith centre in the region. *Faith in the East of England* (East of England Faiths Council July 2005) finds that there are 180,000 beneficiaries of faith based community development in the region. In London, *Neighbourhood Renewal in London: the Role of Faith Communities* (Neighbourhood Renewal London May 2002) identified 7000 projects in 2200 faith buildings. In the West Midlands, *Believing in the Region* (Regional Action West Midlands May 2006) reported that 80% of faith groups deliver some kind of service to the wider community. In the North West, *Faith in England’s North West* (Northwest Development Agency November 2003) shows that faith communities were running more than 5000 social action projects generating income of £69m - £94m per annum. In Yorkshire and the Humber, *Count Us In* (SEARCH 2000) showed that in Hull 90% of churches were involved in social action and *Angels and Advocates* (Price and Kirby 2002) reported that there were 6500 social action projects in churches. In the South West, *Faith in Action* (Patel 2006) demonstrated that 165,000 people were supported by faith groups in the region by 4762 activities. In the East Midlands, *Faith in Derbyshire* (Derby Diocesan Council for Social Responsibility 2006) claims that, on average, churches run nine community activities each.

Crucially the evidence is that faith groups are doing the care work others do not—with the homeless, addicted, and sex workers, for example. The mixed economy of welfare has made such faith-based activities highly visible again, after a period when nobody had talked about religion. Two things accompanied all this and together they impose a whole new dimension—anxiety.

One is the fact that matters have changed since the Church of England last dared to call itself the national church. This is also true of Anglican and established churches across the West. Evidence suggests that religion and belief are both much less formal and significantly less creedal than they were 50 years ago (see Woodhead and Catto 2011). The UK 2011 Census is helpful on this, though of course by no means the only source, nor the definitive one. The headlines report that, despite falling numbers, Christianity remains the largest religion in England and Wales with 33.2 million people (59.3 per cent of the population). This is down from 71.7 per cent in 2001. Muslims are the next major religious group with 2.7 million people (4.8 per cent of the population) and this group has grown in the last decade. In fact this is the group that has increased the most (from 3.0 per cent to 4.8 per cent). Meanwhile the proportion of the population who reported they have no religion has now reached a quarter in the UK—14.1 million people. This is an increase (from 14.8 per cent to 25.1 per cent) (Office for National Statistics 2012, 1). There is also a great deal more religious diversity in general as well as pockets of religious and non-religious intensity around the UK. For example, Knowsley was the local authority in England with the highest proportion of people reporting to be Christians (at 80.9 per cent) and Tower Hamlets had the highest proportion of Muslims at 34.5 per cent (over 7 times the England and Wales figure) (Office for National Statistics 2012, 1).

Likewise, in England and Wales, while church attendance has fallen to 6.3% of the population (Christian Research 2005), the breakdown of attenders has also changed—less than one third are now Anglican, less than one third Catholic, and over a third  (44%) charismatic and independent. That is a massive internal realignment within Christianity alone, which is hardly ever commented upon. According to other sources and other questions, *what* we believe has changed too. Thus, “Belief in ‘a personal God’ roughly halved between 1961 and 2000—from 57% of the population to 26%. But over exactly the same period, belief in a ‘spirit or life force’ doubled —from 22% in 1961 to 44% in 2000” (Woodhead 2012). There is also evidence of consumerist behaviours in religion as people pick religions and ideas within religions to build their own frameworks of belief, often separate from creed and organization. Of course, the data are hugely debatable and other sources say different things, but the trends are clear enough. They point to how religious forms have been changing in this period, as well as the religious mix and the mix of religion and non-religion. It is important to grasp this, I believe, because there is a *real* religious landscape and one imagined by policy and educators, and there is a growing gap between them. This is likely to affect how policy-makers seek to shape services and practice, how providers provide them, and how teachers teach about them. There is a serious risk that they will all shoot wide of the mark. Society is religiously more nominal—that is people report an affiliation without actively attending a church or equivalent. It is also more plural and less formal: more and more of us believe nothing; or something—but we are not sure what; or many things, as in Jewish atheism or Christian Hinduism. Many people hold spiritual, non-creedal, non-organisational beliefs and views, as has been shown. Others for that matter have non-religious beliefs which are also deeply important to them, as in humanism, secularism and environmentalism.

It is important to ask, what is going on? One account is found in Grace Davie’s (1994) idea that we are believing without belonging. This has been inverted by Hervieu-Léger (2006, 48) who suggests the phenomenon of belonging without believing. Voas (2009), on the other hand, says that what we are seeing is a corruption of proper religious forms into a sort of fuzzy fidelity. Woodhead (2012) says that it is a wrongly fundamentalising interpretation to say “that *real* dogmatic religion is declining, leaving people with a muddled and fuzzy residue.” She thinks the exact opposite is true. “Turn it on its head and you see it the right way round: real religion—which is to say everyday, lived religion—is thriving and evolving, whilst hierarchical, dogmatic forms of religion are marginalised.” We could compare it to changing forms of communication. For example, the use of telegrams has declined to a vanishing point, but we do not take this to mean that communication has ceased. We simply look for it in other places, such as email, Twitter, and Facebook. In my view, it is not fuzziness about religion that is the real problem. It is fuzzy secularity. People have some sort of vague sense that religion ought not to matter, while sensing at the same time that it somehow does. But they are, as I say, largely unable to articulate the debate. As if religious change was not complicated enough, I said there were two aspects to the anxiety people feel about religion. All this change is one of them.

The other big change in this period is 9/11; and, in London, 7/7. We find ourselves in a very strange period. The relationship between religion and the secular has not followed the trajectory expected but much sociology. At the same time, religion has changed significantly, precisely in the period when secular theory was at its height and we were therefore thinking about it least. Society turns out to be neither simply secular nor simply religious but complexly both. But the period in which we did not talk well (or much) about religion leaves us precarious on the subject now across the public sphere . And liberalism’s solution—to confine religious debate to Habermas’ (2006) ”public reasons” and somehow rise above the fray in some sort of public neutrality—does not seem adequate. After all, there is no such thing as neutrality; nobody starts from nowhere. There is widespread understanding that religion and belief are everywhere after all. They did not disappear. Billions of people—84%—around the world remain religious, despite the assumptions of secularity (Pew Forum 2012). Millions are in Britain and Europe and millions more in North America. Globalisation and migration expose us to daily encounters with this plurality. The mixed economy of welfare looks to the diversity of faiths to plug the gaps. Yet there is also fear and anxiety about extremism, mostly identified in the popular imagination with precisely those ‘diverse’ religious groups. Governments end up treating religions as both heroes and villains. Publics are muddled right across the West too. And notable intellectuals have been quite aggressive on the subject, as with the so-called ‘New Atheists’. We find ourselves with an ill-informed, often bad-tempered debate and knee-jerk reactions, whereas what we need is a better quality of conversation.

**The Role of Education**

This is where education comes in. This is the final part of the story, and it starts in 2009 when a government body in Britain began to engage in a discussion with academics about religion in the universities. At first a driving force in this conversation for many of those interested in it was anxiety about extremism on university campuses. But I wanted to argue for a different way of thinking about this so-called problem. My first point was that extremism is a tiny minority problem, although it is absolutely right to take it very seriously indeed because the consequences can be catastrophic when things go wrong. I also argue out that extremism on campuses is itself both rare and notoriously hard to judge (see Dinham and Jones 2012). Indeed, radicalism and contestation are what universities *should* be for, so where does one draw the line? But most importantly, I felt, an approach based on anxiety about extremism casts religion and belief as a problem first and foremost, and I wanted to argue that this need not be the starting point. I thought it would be much more effective—and much more realistic—to set religion and belief in their proper context and seek engagement *with* them rather than solutions *for* them. After all, religion and belief are not ‘something else’, ‘somewhere else’. In particular, if governments want faiths to fill the welfare gaps, and faiths are visible again as a result, we need to be good at talking about faiths again. We need education to equip us to do so, and I have been developing a response by way of religious literacy.

Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education is a programme[[3]](#footnote-3) working in universities in the first instance, though we have also been broadening our reach to work with employer groups and service providers as well, and crucially also in schools (in work which is underway at the time of writing). Universities are a good place to be start because they are places of peculiarly intense encounter, especially but not exclusively among young people. They are often even more plural and mixed than the rest of society around them, though sometimes the precise opposite is true—which brings with it a different set of problems. They are also precisely designed to encourage debate about interesting and difficult issues. Many Western societies have become quite good at discussing race, gender and sexual orientation for example. Where does religion fit into this?

Second, universities embody what liberalism takes to be a range of essential freedoms – namely, freedom of speech and freedom of thought. These are the basis of academic freedom; however, religions are sometimes seen as an obstacle to such freedoms.

Thirdly, universities are perpetuators and reflective of a particular post-religious way of thinking, intellectually, which tends to reject religion as distracting nonsense. As these assumptions are produced and reproduced in university settings, they are part of the formation of minds which underpins the conversation in wider society. So, it turns out to matter very much what universities think about religion, even though they may have thought of themselves as secular and therefore neutral on the matter.

Indeed, in research undertaken with Vice Chancellors and other staff in 2009-10, we found two helpful considerations (Dinham & Jones 2012). The first was about the sort of stances universities think they take in relation to religious faith. This led us to a typology in four parts.

For some, society is conceived of as a secular space where public institutions remain as far as possible neutral and education avoids mentioning religions or belief. We called this group ‘soft neutral’. A similar but firmer line actively seeks the protection of public space from religious faith, asserting a duty to preserve public bodies, such as universities, as secular. We called this group ‘hard neutral’.

Others saw religious faith as a resource upon which society can draw (Dinham et al 2009). A larger number of the VCs we spoke to took this view, with many stressing that their campus is friendly to religions and religious people, and comfortable with religious diversity. We called this group ‘Repositories and Resources’.

The fourth approach we identified aims to offer education ‘for the whole person’, incorporating a specifically religious or belief dimension. This perspective was more common in universities which were founded as religious institutions, We called this group ‘Formative-Collegial’.

I have argued elsewhere that these stances may be translatable in to a wide range of other sectors and settings, and in this sense reflect wider sentiments and views about religion and belief in the public sphere (see Dinham & Jones 2012).

The second issue we asked about was what sorts of matters about religion preoccupy Vice Chancellors. Here we found that practical and policy concerns inflected the debate. Vice Chancellors were concerned about legal action arising out of possible discrimination on the grounds of religion and belief; about campus extremism and violence; about being able to market their universities to students of all religion and belief backgrounds and none; and especially about appealing to international students, including those from all parts of the world, and from all religion and belief traditions, identities and backgrounds. These were very concrete and practical concerns

We also looked at who attended our training events in 2010-11 and found that the majority were from chaplaincies and equalities teams. This reflects a widespread assumption amongst our sample that ‘religion’ is something that is done in the chaplaincy primarily, with little resonance or relevance in the wider life of the institution. The risk is that religion is ‘bracketed off’ in this way, rather than understood as something which pervades universities, and wider societies.

Finally, we also conducted case study research in three universities to understand the narratives of religious faith as they are experienced by students and staff. This enabled us to dig down in to the many practical ways in which faith plays out in universities much more widely. We found students who had not felt able to attend for interviews, or for exams, or for Saturday lectures because of clashes with religious events. There were anxieties about public speakers and what to ‘allow’ them to say on topics like Israel and Zionism. Timetabling staff were worried about how to handle the exam periods for the four or five years after 2014 when Ramadan falls in the middle of it. Canteens and bars were taking all sorts of stands for or against halal food, alcohol-free events, and single-sex socials, and there were bitter rumours in one institution that the Muslims were receiving subsidized lunches. There were sports societies whose members were ribbing a Sikh for wearing the 5 K’s[[4]](#footnote-4) Residences were struggling with kosher kitchens and women-only halls. Campus banks either could or could not handle the requests of Muslim students for halal borrowing for student fees while counseling services felt they could not discuss religion with religious students. These may be pressing reasons for taking religion more seriously in university operations, but this still leaves the tricky question of whether and how to take religion seriously in curricula. How, if at all, should teaching and learning respond? This question goes for education all the way down to primary level.

In some subjects of course, religion is simply a topic of relevance as in history and in Religious Studies itself. In others it is a cultural legacy to be decoded and understood, as revealed in the growing tendency to teach ‘Introduction to the Bible’ to students of English Literature so they can manage Milton or Donne. In others again, it embodies the opposite of the rational, scientific method which has emerged in the modern era. As such it is an utter irrelevance, as in Richard Dawkins’ (2007) comparison between astrology and astronomy. In some cases this produces hostility against all religious ideas. This can surely feel painful for students who, as some of our research shows, can feel uncomfortable to hear lecturers be quite rude or offensive about their beliefs or about belief in general. In the social sciences, unlike race, gender, or sexual orientation, religion has rarely been a variable. It simply does not often count as a topic to be counted.

So where are we now? I have observed a lamentable quality of conversation about religion. At the same time, a pressing need for a better quality of conversation in order to avoid knee-jerk reactions which focus only on bad religion. Universities know they have got to get better at providing really excellent student experience, and what is starting to emerge alongside is a bigger debate about the role of religion in teaching and learning. This all reflects a crucial contention in the rest of society about the re-emergence of religious faith as a public category at all. How and what we teach and learn about religion and belief in the milieu will be a key part of how we handle these identities in the context of public services, trade and commerce, and foreign affairs in the decades to come.

**Religious Education in Public Schools**

The question posed by the higher education example, above, as well as the crises and controversies which tend to dominate the debate in law and the media, is how equipped are we for the religious identity which is out there, regardless of our own religion or belief, or none? For RE, it is what part can – and should - it play in equipping young people for such engagement?

To take the example of the UK in recent years, RE has increasingly - and largely accidentally - been populated by themes like citizenship and cohesion. This appears to be true of other countries too, as some of the chapters in the value attest. In Canada and Australia, and continental Europe too, inter-cultural education has been promoted in this space. What both approaches imply is that RE is primarily intended to perform a specific social function - to connect across difference. This is increasingly driven by anxiety about extremism, and about the challenge of responding to growing diversity as Europe continues to globalize.

These are important concerns, no doubt, and they should certainly be addressed somewhere, somehow in what young people learn. But why in the RE space? And how far has it been thought through, consciously and thoroughly, by the RE community itself? Part of RE is the development of skills and understanding which equip young people to engage positively with ideas and concepts different from, and sometimes challenging to their own, and this can aid good relations across difference. The notion that RE can help produce citizens who are tolerant of all religions and none is seductive, to be sure. But understanding is not a guarantee of tolerance and respect. And in any case, on its own, it presents a hollowed out version of the RE idea. It misses the wider opportunities for simple, wide-eyed enrichment. And it colludes with an idea of religion as the opposite – as a threat to cohesion about which something must be done.

In the Religious Literacy programme, set out above, we see RE in a different way: it should not be about cohesion and citizenship alone, but about the study of religions and beliefs in themselves, as a basis for a well-informed engagement with the rich variety of religion and belief encounters throughout life. Young people should learn about religion alongside the other Arts and Humanities, enabling them to understand the chain of memory in which they stand – most of whose links were forged in the religious mode - and the comings and goings of religion in history and place across the world. The discipline of History is not asked to deliver ‘good citizens’, nor geography the ‘global self’. That would be to confuse civic and moral categories which should be part of the wider formation of young people. Education in general is certainly intended for such moral formation, but it should not be holed up in one marginal corner where it takes up all the space.

RE does not do best when it is marginalized and populated by proxy themes like cohesion. Neither is it at its strongest when it sticks to teaching the world religions as though ‘they’ are ‘out there’, or as historical traditions, either *in* the past or stuck there. Religion is contemporary and real. It is lived. It is identity, as well as tradition, and it is contested internally in each individuals’ daily experience. The pressing religious and social question of our time is how we equip people to get to grips with the religion and belief which turns out to be all around after all.

Drawing the strands together, I would argue for educators at all levels to teach about religion in at least four key ways: 1. I would like to see teaching about the real religious landscape, as revealed by cutting edge data, not an imagined one which harks back to the 1950s; 2. I would like to see teaching which enables students to engage with their own prejudices and muddles about religion, and help to straighten them out at the level of how religion and belief are conceptualised in the first place; 3. I would like to see teaching which focuses on the religion and belief which is already there, not so much on religion as a thing of the past or something ‘other’ and out there. Teaching about religion as identity rather than tradition is more likely to enable students to engage with religion as something lived, experienced and real; 4. I would like to see teaching of religion as an integrated part of education, not a marginal add on, which is colonized in any case by citizenship studies or ethics.

Teaching about religion needs to equip a new generation to work in sophisticated ways with religiously plural publics; to engage intelligently with a majority religious world; to be able to travel, trade and communicate across borders of religion and belief with confidence, not fear; and to see in religion some of the poetic wisdom which has helped previous generations to thrive, not dismiss it as mythological nonsense from a primitive past. I think it is enriching to recognize that there are multiple paths to a critical and engaged analysis. After a century or so of fuzzy secularism in schools and universities, it is time to rethink how we educate about religion because it is everywhere, contemporary and pressing.

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***Case Law***

*Bull & Anor v Hall & Anor*,[2013] UKSC 73

*Eweida and Others v. The United Kingdom*, [2013] ECHR 37

1. *Eweida and Others v. The United Kingdom*, [2013] ECHR 37 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Bull & Anor v Hall & Anor*,[2013] UKSC 73 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Of which I am Programme Director. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The 5 K’s are worn by orthodox Sikhs: kesh – uncut hair; kara – armband; kangha – comb; kacchera – knee length shorts; and kirpan – sword. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)