



***'BUILDING OUR OWN CATHEDRAL'***

***The report of the religious Literacy and spirituality conference***

**Held in Westminster Abbey**

**On Thursday March 14<sup>th</sup> 2013**

**Maurice Irfan Coles and Julia Ipgrave**

Christian  
Muslim  
Forum

## **PREAMBLE:**

Sometimes, just sometimes, you organise a conference and receive rave reviews from the majority of participants. The Christian Muslim Forum's (CMF) conference on *Religious Literacy and Spirituality* held at Westminster Abbey on the 14<sup>th</sup> March 2013 achieved those dizzy heights. Glowing terms like, 'fantastic', 'excellent,' and 'inspirational' were typical of a range of reflective, often detailed and sometimes critical evaluations. For one participant the highlight of the conference was the setting itself: 'The Abbey gives an added 'awe' and 'wonder' element even to us as adults.' Another, who happens to be Muslim, wrote '...the day was really inspiring and provided a space for contemplation as well as discussion in an amazing venue. I feel spiritually uplifted! The tour of the Abbey and evensong were icing on the cake.'

Many, encouragingly, urged the organisers to 'keep up the good work' and to try and influence positively the crucial on-going curriculum debate about the revised national curriculum and the place of RE and spirituality in the life of any school.

The conference came about as a result of a spirited discussion at the 2012 annual CMF residential conference which lamented the present position and uncertainty of the place of Religious Education in the school curriculum and the limited focus in education reform on a narrow range of academic and heavily tested subjects. The debate widened to discuss the importance of spirituality as well as RE in the curriculum. Julia Ipgrave, the Christian education specialist, and her Muslim counterpart, Maurice Irfan Coles, suggested the Forum organise a conference to explore religious literacy and spirituality. They recruited Bruce Gill, the Chairman of the National Association of SACREs and CMF's Director, Julian Bond to join them in fleshing out a full day conference and; later, were more than fortunate to work with the Westminster Abbey Institute who provided the venue and a workshop; and who promoted the conference in their spring programme brochure, *Doing God Where Are We Now?*

This report chronicles the aims, processes and outcomes of that day and has been written so that those who were not able to attend - and Abbey space limited us to 40 participants- might follow the arguments, and reflect on the recommendations. In addition, in appendix one, Julia Ipgrave, after analysing all the conference materials from the point of view of the current position of Religious Education in England, has written a paper that brings together the varied perspectives of conference delegates, the relationship of conference conversations and feedback to religious education debates. Finally, appendix two contains the text of the CMF conference submission to the Secretary of State, Michael Gove, as their response to his national curriculum proposals.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The place of RE and spiritual development within the basic curriculum and the importance and status given to RE as subject, provided the educational context to a day's conference held at Westminster Abbey on March 14<sup>th</sup> 2013. The conference organised and subsidised by the Christian Muslim Forum, thanks to a grant from the Goldsmiths' Company, brought together 40 colleagues from a range of educational backgrounds in order to discuss religious literacy and spirituality.

Kate Christopher, the keynote speaker, defined the key concepts and powerfully argued that 'RE has a protean quality to transform, through its unique ability to connect to the human spirit.' She offered a link between religious literacy and spirituality, and maintained that



'ultimately, the value for the human spirit of religious literacy is in its operational nature, and the imperative it contains to act.' She reiterated the OFSTED and legal definitions of spirituality and overlaid it with the recent curriculum review's aim that a curriculum should provide students with the core

knowledge that they need to be educated citizens. In addition, it should introduce pupils to the best that has been thought and said, and engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement.

Religious literacy, Kate argued, was good in itself. She defined it as a language that required decoding; a form of cultural literacy, a way of connecting to a living tradition; and a call to action. Religious literacy, for Kate, is people literacy. This is what gives it such a transformative quality. Religious literacy is not just an academic study, it is essentially operational. Throughout her presentation she used the extended metaphor of the building of a cathedral for the development of religious literacy and spirituality, a metaphor that was taken up through the course of the day.

Five interactive workshops – *The power of words: delving deeper into Jewish text; The power of story: a journey through the Book of Job; The Sacred Spaces project: Creativity and Spirituality; Christian Meditation with Children, and Pilgrimage Then and Now* - provided practical guidance and were vehicle for discussion about potential classroom implications. Group sessions prompted by three major questions helped focus participants on the potential for religious literacy and spiritual development, on the challenges faced and on the emerging strategic priorities for RE and spirituality.

In her summary at the end of the conference Julia Ipgrave itemised the major issues arising from the day, themes which she later translated into an accompanying paper, *The relationship of conference conversations and feedback to religious education debates*. (Appendix One). This succinctly encapsulates the background to the conference and opinions expressed during the conference on:-

- The relationship between spirituality and religion
- Spirituality and inter-disciplinarity
- Spirituality in a context of plurality
- Spiritual engagement and intellectual rigour, and finally
- 'The condition of RE' question.

The conference ended with a powerful message from Bishop Richard Cheetham, CMF President, who argued that the conference themes were important not merely for us and for all our schools, but for all society. For him, the key question was 'How we live well together?' 'All the more important in a society and world as plural and complex as ours. We needed to engage in real conversations in order to articulate a really worthwhile long term vision, a vision that would allow us all to build that cathedral.

### ***THE STRUCTURE OF THE DAY***

Aims: By the end of the day we hoped to have:

- 1) Explored what is meant by spirituality
- 2) Considered some practical faith community-based approaches to developing in pupils and students' greater understanding of what spirituality might be
- 3) Identified particular challenges and opportunities presented by such work.

#### Programme:

Introductory key note *Spirituality in the context of Religious Literacy* by Kate Christopher (Head of RE, Southend High School for Boys and member of the NATRE Executive),

Practical classroom focused workshops:

- Debbie Danon (Three Faiths Forum) – *The power of words - delving deeper into Jewish texts*
- Toni Coulton (The 'dare2engage' team) – *The power of story - a journey through the Book of Job.*
- Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra (The Sacred Spaces project) *Creativity and Spirituality*
- Charles & Patricia Posnett (World Community of Christian Meditation) *Christian Meditation with Children*
- Grazyna Richmond (Westminster Abbey Education Department) – *Pilgrimage Then and Now.*

Group discussions: reflections on the workshops and the implications for classroom practice facilitated by Bruce Gill.

Key issues for the conference, Julia Ipgrave

Final Words, Bishop Richard Cheetham, President of the Christian Muslim Forum.

Voluntary tour of the Abbey and attendance at evensong.

## **THE CONFERENCE MATTERS**

Canon Andrew Tremlett, on behalf of the Abbey, warmly and humorously welcomed delegates and explained something of the history of the Abbey and the wonderful Jerusalem Chamber, which was to be our main home for the day. Sheikh Ibrahim Mogra (Co-Chair Christian Muslim Forum) similarly warmly welcomed the delegates on behalf of the Forum. Maurice Irfan Coles, master of ceremonies and time keeper for the day, outlined something of the important context of the conference, itemised its intended outcomes and then introduced the keynote speaker Kate Christopher, explaining that the planning group had set Kate the Herculean task of exploring what is meant by spirituality in the context of encouraging religious literacy in schools - all within a 25 minute time frame!

### **MAIN POINTS OF THE KEYNOTE: SPIRITUALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF ENCOURAGING RELIGIOUS LITERACY IN SCHOOLS**

As evaluations indicated, even for those who disagreed with some of her tenets, Kate was more than up to the job and covered the most complex issues with clarity, speed and accessibility - so much so that delegates found her input 'inspirational' and an ideal start to the major themes of the day. She cleverly took the extended metaphor of building a cathedral as the dominant image that bound her talk together. Using the story of Ken Follett's 1989 classic, *The Pillars of the Earth*, which relates the building of a cathedral in the turbulent times of twelfth century England she said:

I have wandered around my fair share of Gothic cathedrals, and, as intended by the architects, I stand staring up, lost in thought, occasionally bumping into other visitors who are also staring up, lost in thought. I wonder who dreamed this up. Who imagined this soaring dream of stone, timber and maths, and believed in it so much that it was built, not once but many times?

For Kate, *In the Pillars of the Earth*, contained the real people who chipped away at stones for decades, who never lived to see the cathedrals finished, but whose belief and determination meant that hundreds of years later humans like them, could staring up, become lost in thought. 'To stand in these gorgeous gothic homages to God, is to understand the power of human yearning for the divine.'

Similarly, the Abbey where we were based connected people to the power of human yearning for the divine. She related the moving story of one of her colleagues who explained why she loves teaching RE so much. Her colleague 'imagined that with every encounter she offers her students with life's more searching questions ... that she is like a medieval builder, working in the yard of a grand project. She is not just chipping away at stone, she is building a cathedral.'

As an RE teacher, Kate maintained that, as well as being a good and interesting thing in itself, 'RE has a protean quality to transform, through its unique ability to connect to the human spirit.' She offered a link between religious literacy and spirituality, and argued that 'ultimately, the value for the human spirit of religious literacy, is in its operational nature, and the imperative it contains to act - even if we, like the medieval builders- never see live to see the fruits of what we do.'



Kate's essential argument was straightforward. Spirituality is written large in current education legislation but it is purposefully not religious; it is about the many ways the human

spirit can grow. Her thesis was that religious literacy promotes spiritual growth. It is most often through religion that we encounter the journeys into suffering, despair, joy and understanding that have been undertaken by humans before us, expressed as art, poetry, meditations and prayer; and through exploring these previous journeys, we learn and grow. For Kate there were pressing political and ethical reasons why 'a large dose of religious literacy is required, especially as in a society where the connections between people are distorted or limited, our spirits cannot flourish.'

She offered the current legal and OFSTED definitions of spirituality in education and traced something of its long and distinguished history. The 1988 education reform act stated that the school curriculum should be:

A balanced and broadly-based curriculum which - (a) promotes the spiritual, moral, social cultural, mental and physical development of pupils and of society; and (b) prepares such pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life.

These two aims are upheld in the 2013 draft framework for the national curriculum. In addition, this document states that:

The National Curriculum provides pupils with an introduction to the core knowledge that they need to be educated citizens. It introduces pupils to the best that has been thought and said; and helps engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement.

Citing Barbara Wintersgill's research into teenagers' understandings of spirituality, she reported that most of the young people questioned understood spirituality to have something to do with personal growth. 50% of young people understood spirituality as being associated with individuality, personal growth, inner 'you', character, soul, essence. The next largest group, 26%, thought spirituality was about holding beliefs, some religious, some not; and the next largest group, 9%, felt spirituality was about following one's religion. The overwhelming majority of teenagers felt that RE was the subject most likely to contribute to their spiritual development.

If spirituality was not the sole preserve of RE, however, what is its link with religious literacy? Religious literacy Kate argued was good in itself. She defined it as:

- *A language that required decoding*, for example when you enter a sacred building you appreciate it more if you understand it, can name the connections, and appreciate the symbols
- *A form of cultural literacy* because it enriches the world around you
- *A way of connecting* to a living tradition
- *A call to action*. For Kate religious literacy, which starts with understanding, 'has built into it a requirement for action that I am not sure any other literacy has. The action may be related to food, alcohol, clothes, gender relations, representations of images, and so on, but the point I am making is that religious literacy has an interpersonal element, because religion is a lived thing.'
- *Religious literacy is people literacy*. This is what gives it such a transformative quality. Religious literacy is not just an academic study, it is essentially operational.

Kate continued with exploring the connection between religious literacy and spirituality. For her, as religious literacy is actually 'people literacy,' it must contribute to the growth of the human spirit. This happens on two levels. The first is on the knowledge level: religious literacy enhances our ability to fully experience the world for it enables us to encounter the treasure trove of wisdom that religion offers. The second is on the interpersonal level- being open to religious knowledge means we are open to people. 'We grow and learn in collaboration - we are not islands - openness to life and all the people you meet in your life is essential for the human spirit to flourish.' Conversely, Kate argued, the spirit cannot flourish if human discourse is limited. The knowledge gained from religion contains within it, at the very least, the capacity to think differently. The potential of this knowledge is ultimately operational, and transformative- 'the potential of this knowledge is the imperative to act.' Kate ended her inspiring keynote address by bringing delegates back to the here and now, to the day's purpose of our presence in the Abbey, to the extended metaphor that glued together her presentation. She eloquently concluded:

I can't think of a more wonderful place to think about spirituality, in all its forms, than here in this building which has seen so much that is very good and very bad about the human spirit. We have been given a day out of busy lives, a day to use for contemplation, discussion and learning.' She went on, 'the thing about knowledge is that it can't be un-known. Once we have it, we must use it to act, even if the task does seem insurmountable. Like the medieval builders who never lived to see their work come to fruition, we too must trust our spirits, and build our own cathedral.

## FEEDBACK FROM THE WORKSHOPS

### 1) Sacred Spaces : Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra



This workshop offered a description of the Sacred Spaces Project that used glass making activities and visits to other places of worship to explore the concept of sacred space with students at an Islamic supplementary school in Leicester. The workshop gave details of the structure of the project, of the learning intentions and outcomes and of the different activities involved. As such it provided ideas of activities that could be replicated in other

contexts (particularly if the school had access to the expertise of an artist like the glass artist in the Sacred Spaces project). Members of the group discussed the activities, compared them with other RE learning strategies and considered how the project being described could be adapted to a context where pupils did not have a faith background. Ibrahim's reflexivity was much appreciated by participants as he spoke about his own learning from the experience - for example his own increased ability to see the sacred and spiritual in the art and architecture of other faiths - and a different way of looking at his own religious space, his mosque. It gave him a desire to see spiritual aspects included in mosque building projects – and the question asked; 'In what way will this building speak to us of God?' He shared the difference the project had made to his and his colleagues' philosophies of education and pedagogies – to the degree of independence and self-expression he would like to allow students in their learning and also to the collaboration between genders in the madrasah. (For an article related to the whole project go to [www.coedfoundation.org.uk](http://www.coedfoundation.org.uk))

### 2) Jewish Texts: Debbie Danon

This workshop demonstrated a way of using scriptures to explore deeper religious meaning in class. It emphasised method – starting with a nursery rhyme to practice Jewish methods of interrogating text, introducing the PARDES model of interpretation:

- *Pshat* – what is the direct reading of the text?
- *Remez* - what might be the allegorical or metaphorical meaning?
- *Drash* – what do we imagine came before this story? What happens next? Can you suggest explanations for what is not explained?
- *Sod* – what is the hidden message of the story? Is there a lesson here about god and the nature of the universe in which we live?

We practised learning 'in *Chevruta*' (meaning 'companionship') by working in pairs challenging each other to find meaning in the text. The methods were applied to the story of Cain and Abel.

The workshop was appreciated as providing a new way for the Christian members to approach scripture and find deeper, spiritual significance in familiar texts. Particularly powerful was the concept of interpretation as active and dynamic – pushing our partners

and ourselves to struggle with the text - we were told that as the text was viewed as directly from God so struggling with the text was (in true Jewish tradition) 'wrestling with God'. (For more information regarding the Three Faiths Forum see <http://www.3ff.org.uk>)

### **3) Pilgrimage Then and Now: Grazyna Richmond**

In this workshop attendees were given an experience of the Abbey tour that is part of Westminster Abbey's Education Department's Pilgrimage session for school children. The two hour long visit includes a classroom-based element where pupils discuss what a pilgrimage is, the reasons for pilgrimage, places of pilgrimage in Christianity and other religions, and make a pilgrim's badge to take home.

They are then taken round the Abbey, find out about the foundation of Westminster Abbey by Edward the Confessor, how Henry III rebuilt the Abbey in St. Edward's honour, the role of medieval pilgrimage and how the Abbey is still a place of both religious and secular pilgrimage today. The staff explore with pupils what a church is used for and think about Westminster Abbey as a Royal Peculiar and the role it has to play both historically and in the nation today. To explain how the Abbey is a place of welcome for all, the department gives examples of prayers from other faith traditions used at the Commonwealth Day Observance every year. They also examine the balance between faith and tourism and how the Abbey hopes to make visitors into pilgrims (this point provoked much discussion in the group). The schools' session also includes a time in the Shrine, allowing pupils to see the religious heart of the Abbey and to allow them a time of quiet reflection away from the noisy crowds outside. (For further information go to <http://www.westminster-abbey.org/education>)

### **4) Christian Meditation with Children: Charles & Patricia Posnett**

The workshop facilitators provided an excellent mix of narrative, theory and practice. Charles explained that Christian meditation had hitherto been the poor relation in Christian education but, thanks to the work of Fathers John Main and Laurence Freeman, there is now an ecumenical network of Christian meditation groups which have become the World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM). It was through this organisation that they had worked to spread the meditative practices in schools. There were now some 120 schools and 25,000 children who meditated daily. For them, meditation was 'the prayer of the heart;' it was a move from the mind to the heart. Meditation was about simply learning to Be, simply existing in God's presence rather than talking to him; for it was argued, God is simple. In a world beset with noise and bustle, a daily act of meditation provided time, space and above all silence. Today's children have to be taught to be silent. Quoting Meister Eckhart, Charles explained that, 'Nothing is so much like God in all the universe as silence.' In practical terms, children were asked to choose any word that was sacred to them and, if no word came to mind they were given the Aramaic word, *Maranatha* which translates as 'Come Lord.' Simple meditation where children concentrated upon their sacred word could be undertaken with any age group and for as long as children could concentrate. Five minutes was recommended for five years olds, increasing to ten minutes by the time children were ten.

A short video sequence saw an assembly of 250 primary aged pupils meditating together; pupils who later asserted that 'we like spending time with God'. Staff explained the benefits of daily mediation arguing that:-

- ✓ It was a calming influence
- ✓ It helped produce the best attitude for learning
- ✓ It help raised attainment and concentration levels
- ✓ It gave children a sense of awe and wonder
- ✓ It made children eager to be in the world.

Meditation provided the fruits of the spirit and allowed children to live in the moment from the heart. The session ended with the signposting of a number of resources for participants to practice meditation in the particular circumstances in which they found themselves. (For further information e-mail Charles Posnett [charles@posnett.entadsl.com](mailto:charles@posnett.entadsl.com))

### **5) *The power of story - a journey through the Book of Job: Toni Coulton***



In this interactive workshop participants were taken though the dare to engage team's *Rage, despair and hope* programme which is designed for 16-19 years olds. The programme contains 22 pieces of art by Si Smith that take students through the story of Job, accompanied by an audio narrative, exploring the emotions and events in the story in an accessible and engaging way. Each of the 22 inspires a number of key questions, some of which were discussed collectively by the group in such a way as to encourage deep discussion about the emotional response elicited.

Confronting the age old issue of Why do people suffer?, the workshop has the power to evoke strong emotions which will require skilful handling in the classroom.

Participants reported that they were really 'tuning in' to Job's experience; as they spoke of the stark images, the dark and light, the metaphorical aspects, of 'going through the story and coming out the other side' as a 'redemptive' experience, they were not just *feeling* but also *interpreting* in a way that brought their experience in line with broader religious meanings.

As a parting gift, participants received the *Rage, Hope and Despair DVD* which contains all the art work, along with a wide range of resources to use with students; games and activities to facilitate personal exploration of the emotions, lesson materials looking at existentialism, wisdom and comparing the story of Job in Christian, Jewish and Islamic texts, and workshops offering a creative response to rage, hope and despair through poetry, art,

music, rap and drama. Compiled by Lat Blaylock (Editor, RE Today) and Toni Coulton (Chair, FESTIVE), the resources are suitable for 16-19 year old students in schools, sixth forms and FE Colleges and could be used as a day-long conference, or in a series of sessions over a term. (For further information go to [info@dare2engage.org](mailto:info@dare2engage.org))

## **REFLECTIONS ON THE CLASSROOM FOCUS OF THE TWO WORKSHOP SESSIONS**

In groups, conference examined three major questions:

*Question One: What opportunities and benefits do you see such work as presenting for developing in children and young people a) greater awareness of spirituality and b) religious literacy?*

a) Greater awareness of spirituality: participants expressed six key points:

1. A link was made between spirituality and the quality of relationships, the methodology of the texts session was seen as promoting this with the idea of paired methodology and struggling together (with the text) to push selves and each other to deeper understanding. The same interest in relationships was found in the Job session where participants were led to develop an empathy with Job in his trials.
2. The totality of the art, music and words experience of Job was appreciated as feeding the spiritual side - the stark contrasts between dark and light were particularly striking and participants felt they were really tuning into Job's experience.
3. Participants in the Job workshop were conscious of the redemptive aspect as they were taken through the story and out the other side.
4. The use of art (in the Sacred Spaces workshop) 'spoke to the heart and appealed to the imagination' and the active nature of engagement produced 'spiritual vibrations'.
5. The power of stories and metaphorical readings of stories for developing spirituality was highlighted.
6. The simplicity and adaptability of Christian meditation techniques provided excellent opportunities for pupils of any background to connect with their own spirituality.

b) Greater awareness of Religious literacy: Participants voiced five key points :

1. There was some disagreement in the group about the relationship between spirituality and literacy – one member of the group didn't see why religious literacy was seen as so important for spirituality, another felt that spirituality was essentially tied up with religion, another spoke of religions as 'the nursery schools of spirituality'.
2. The Jewish text session was viewed as having increased understanding of Jewish methods of interpretation and of religious texts and provided a methodology used in the Jewish tradition of relevance to Christians too for understanding their scriptures.
3. The Jewish texts session was seen as one that could usefully be replicated in the classroom – with 6<sup>th</sup> Formers in particular in mind.
4. The story of Job raised powerful emotions the exploration of which students could learn from.

5. The Pilgrimage with its use of imaginative stories demonstrated how stories from a range of traditions can join us all together.



*Question Two: What challenges do you see such approaches presenting for designing and delivering schemes of work for developing religious literacy and spirituality?*

Participants articulated 6 challenges:-

1. The challenge of talking about God, especially in a secular environment like England. As one respondent put it, 'The elephant in the classroom is talking about God.'
2. The challenge of learning to live with times of silence. Pupils were constantly bombarded with noise; meditation requires periods of silence that some pupils really struggled with.
3. The challenge of relating to pupils who have no background in a religious tradition.
4. The challenge of determining RE's remit. Should RE be presenting a general spirituality not bound to religion or should RE be the area of the curriculum where a particularly religious understanding of spirituality is developed? This approach would then leave other spiritual dimensions to be developed in different curriculum subjects – e.g. the arts (aesthetic appreciation of beauty), or science (the wonder of the world).
5. The challenge for RE in general was to persuade teachers to let go, to persuade them they too must be willing to go on a journey, to be sensitive to pupil need.
6. The challenge of resources both in terms of time and money. All approaches demanded some level of funding - albeit in some cases relatively modest - but RE budgets were very tight. In supplementary and mainstream settings there was insufficient time to cover all aspects of the syllabus. Coverage of all eight levels of the RE curriculum made it very difficult to respond to individual child need.

*Question Three: What should be the strategic priorities for RE as a subject in relation to developing spirituality and religious literacy?*

Participants listed five strategic priorities:

1. Religious Education needs to be refocused. It should recapture the lost ground by articulating what we believe spirituality is, and is not. It is NOT religiosity. We need to provide space within teaching and learning for pupils to have time for silence and reflection; for it is through this vehicle that pupils can convert their religious learning into spiritual growth. Similarly, space and reflection time is required to consolidate religious learning into values (like empathy, courage and compassion), and then to transform these values into action.
2. Religious Education's profile needs to be raised. In part this could be achieved by RE being recognised as a Russell Group university 'facilitating subject', in part by more effective teacher training and in part by campaigning.
3. Religious Education must be underpinned by effective teacher training: Much RE was taught by non-specialists which contrasted with the position of other subjects like PE, Maths and Music. Effective RE begins with the knowledge and expertise of staff, and non-specialists require up-skilling and resources so that they are given the confidence and knowledge to talk about God and about religion, and to admit they did not know the answers to everything. The heart, the soul and the passion behind RE should be transmitted through this training.
4. Religious Education must relate to other areas.
5. RE needs to dialogue with other subjects. Strong links with the Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural dimensions of education must be created. This, in part, could be achieved by signposting existing material.

### **SUMMARY OF THE KEY ISSUES ARISING FROM THE DAY: JULIA IPGRAVE**

Julia Ipgrave summed up some of the key issues that had arisen during the course of the day. She took the British Museum exhibition of Ice Age art as her linking metaphor; subtitled '*arrival of the modern mind*' the exhibition revealed very early human attempts both to discern patterns in the world and to find meanings that transcend what can be seen or heard. For Julia this modern mind is about spiritual endeavour. She went on to make six salient conference points:-

- 1) In RE in the past it has been common to separate out religion and spirituality rendering the former rigid and harsh and the latter vague and fuzzy, but there is a deeper interwoven relationship between the two.
- 2) The explorations of sacred spaces, sacred texts, religious narratives and art entail finding and expressing spiritual patterns and meanings and so engaging with the spiritual.
- 3) One challenge for RE teachers is how to convey this sense of the spiritual within religion to pupils with little or no experience of religion in their background.
- 4) Another challenge is the transferability of spirituality across religious traditions. What is common and what is unique within the religious traditions? How far can pupils learn spirituality from religions outside their own traditions?



- 5) The power of religious story can be transformational and dangerous (for example the story of Job) and this raises a third challenge; how do teachers handle the passions that can arise?
- 6) Teaching for religious literacy and spiritual development is very important; they are key to understanding and participating in the human story. The challenges involved require a well-trained, sensitive and skilful teaching force and so the training of RE teachers is a priority.

### **CLOSING REMARKS: BISHOP RICHARD CHEETHAM**

The Bishop of Kingston, Richard Cheetham, President of the Christian Muslim Forum concluded the day with a reflective and very powerful message. The conference themes, the Bishop argued, were important not merely for us and for all our schools, but for all society. For him, the key question was 'How do we live well together?' It is a question that is all the more important in a society and world as plural as and as complex as ours.

The Bishop highlighted three major themes. The first, the context of the day, Westminster Abbey was symbolic of the importance of religious belief in the life of our nation. The development of the Westminster Abbey Institute, with its *Doing God Where Are We Now?* programme encouraged good conversations and promoted good spaces for dialogue. Dialogue provided the second theme, the role of the Christian Muslim Forum which is totally committed to promoting inter faith dialogue. The third and major theme was the world of education, where we as reflective practitioners got to grips with the complexities of religious literacy and spirituality.

How we live well together was as important as the many environmental challenges that faced us because if we got it right, that would be wonderful but, getting it wrong could be disastrous. Richard returned to an earlier theme of the day, What does it mean to be truly human? He reminded us of a passage that Kate Christopher had used in her keynote address:

The proper function of a 'national University... is not a place of professional education. Universities are not intended to teach the knowledge required to fit men for some special mode of gaining their livelihood. The object is not to make skilful lawyers, or physicians, or engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings... 'Men are men before they are lawyers, or physicians, or merchants, or manufacturers; and if you make them capable and sensible men, they will make themselves capable and sensible lawyers or physicians. (J.S. Mill 1867)

He attacked the myth of neutral knowledge, for living in a plural society meant that we had to reflect upon our own traditions, and ask ourselves how we relate to others. We had to find a language, a way of thinking, a way of developing spirituality and religious understanding that cut across the whole of the world of education. For the Bishop the conference was really about how we created partnership in a plural context; how the Institute, the Christian Muslim Forum and the world of education could engage in real conversations in order to articulate a really worthwhile long term vision, a vision that would allow us all to build that cathedral.

## EVALUATIONS:

The penultimate section of the evaluation sheet asked participants to list two questions they will take away from the conference. It is indicative of the reflective nature of the audience and perhaps of the stimulus provided that there was some commonality concerning both the practical pedagogic dimensions of the day, and concerning what can be described as higher order questions, for example:

- Is there any necessity to separate academically the concept of spirituality from religion? Is the one not synonymous with the other?
- Is religious literacy a viable discrete concept or is it spiritual literacy in another guise?
- How do the concepts interlink?
- Are Muslims in the UK compromising their religious identity by thinking non-religiously on spiritual aspects?
- What is RE's contribution to the learning process across the curriculum?
- What opportunities are there for RE and religious literacy to underpin the school ethos, values and curriculum?
- How can we encourage/ provide opportunities for spiritual development/ spirituality in an appropriate manner in multifaith contexts?
- How do we keep the integrity of non-faith children and learners?
- How can we include the missing dimension: the spiritual resources of modern science for human spiritual growth and responsible action?

And training, development and dissemination issues

- How can the culture of marginalising the teaching of RE be changed?
- How can I share what I have learnt with others I work with?
- Should we go for depth rather than breadth?
- How can we develop rigour as standard?
- How can my classroom practice be impacted by what I have explored today?
- Can we have a range of examples of what religious literacy is within RE?
- How can we make a stronger input to the study of RE and guidelines offered to schools?
- Is there support for a core national RE syllabus?
- How can the teaching material available for teachers be of the best quality?
- How can meditation practices be more widely diffused in an interfaith context?
- How will this influence government thinking and support for RE?

And existential questions about their role in the world, their role as teachers, their place as advocates.

## **CONCLUSION**

40 people but 40 powerful, influential and reflective people met for one brief day in one of the world's greatest and most inspirational abbeys; age-old centre of England's religious, political and spiritual life. Inspired and so well led by the keynote speaker and the workshops facilitators, steered and orchestrated by the planning group and key Forum members, these 40 people engaged in a lively dialogue and debate about the nature of religious literacy and spirituality. The depth of the arguments, the desire to bring about meaningful and deep change for students of all ages, led to fundamental discussion about the place of RE, religious literacy and spirituality that should serve to inform current debates about the future form and content of the nation's curriculum. Conference hoped that their thoughts and passions might influence the RE review and the thinking of Her Majesty's Government, and that those who control the education system might too share in the collective enterprise of helping young people build their own cathedral.

**Maurice Irfan Coles, Conference Chair and Rapporteur**

Photographs by Rabiya Latif

## **APPENDIX ONE: JULIA IPGRAVE - THE RELATIONSHIP OF CONFERENCE CONVERSATIONS AND FEEDBACK TO RELIGIOUS EDUCATION DEBATES**

### **General Introduction**

Religious education has been a statutory subject in the curriculum since 1944 and from that time and increasingly so in recent years, there have been debates about its purposes and methods. Discussions have grown more complex as both the religious diversity and the secularity of the pupil population have increased, and more urgent as teachers seek greater curriculum time and professional status for their subject and for themselves but are conscious of the danger of it slipping into the position of 'Cinderella subject'. General trends in educational philosophy and pedagogy have influenced the subject; the tension between 'content-centred' and 'child-centred' learning, for example, resolved itself into the distinction between *learning about* and *learning from* religion. At the same time RE has been subject to external (government) pressures requiring it to address perceived needs of society whether community cohesion or the prevention of terrorism, an instrumentalisation that has sometimes diverted the subject away from its religion focus. It is perhaps an indication of both the marginalisation of RE in the curriculum and the frequent side-lining of religion within RE that commentators on religion in England (notably prominent sociologist of religion, Grace Davie) have remarked on the widespread religious illiteracy in our society. Education for spiritual development is also a requirement in the curriculum. Spirituality is commonly understood to have strong associations with religion and would therefore seem to find a natural home and opportunity for development in religious education; at the same time the positioning of spiritual development as a cross-curricular element in the National Curriculum (a position retained in the current educational changes) gives added complexity to the relationship between spiritual and religious learning in school.

### **The relationship between spirituality and religion**

#### **Context:**

The relationship between religion and spirituality has long been a focus for debate in the RE world. A flurry of interest in spirituality at the end of the last century was fed by the universalist philosophy of Alistair Hardy and the work of David Hay (*The Spirit of the Child* 1998) and the prediction of social scientists that organised communal religion was being effaced by an innate and individualised spirituality - a position that some of the same social scientists have more recently reconsidered. A duality of spirituality and religion was set up, the two being seen as in tension with each other, the latter often being portrayed as negative and limiting. Against this view others argued that such understandings of spirituality denied its communal dimension and its rootedness in religious traditions.

#### **Conference:**

Our conference explicitly sought to bring religion and spirituality together and demonstrate the strong relation between them. This was an argument made in the keynote and the message intended in the use of examples of engagement with the spiritual dimension from the heart of Christian, Islamic and Jewish traditions.

### **Conversations:**

The feedback from the discussions and feedback forms shows that the debate is still ongoing – one delegate even spoke of an ‘impasse’ between different positions. Some preferred to maintain a distinction between spirituality and religion and others to merge them as part of the same thing. On the one hand we have the comments that make clear distinction between the two: ‘spirituality ...is NOT religiosity’; spirituality ‘was being two very distinct languages that come from very different perspectives.’ On the other we have reference to the ‘interdependency of religions and spirituality’ and the comment ‘Is there any necessity to academically separate the concept of spirituality from religion? Is the one not synonymous with the other?’ Some left the relationship as a question; ‘What is the difference between spirituality and religious literacy?’; ‘How do religious literacy and spirituality interlink?’; ‘how might religious learning be converted into spiritual growth?’

Participants of conference discussions espoused different philosophies on the question. One delegate noted this when he commented, ‘while for some “Religious literacy” made sense and naturally leads to spirituality; for others ... spirituality is really something quite different that may or may not be connected to “religions” ’. Echoes of David Hay’s philosophy were evident in the comment, ‘authentic spirituality needs to be incarnated in the individual ... the container will be different for each individual’, and traces of that negativity towards the religious (as opposed to the spiritual) in the following comment: ‘much contemporary religion seems somewhat nostalgic insofar as it looks for security in commonly expressed formulas of spirituality (I guess this is where fundamentalism eventually evolves from)’. In contrast to this a main argument of the keynote was that religious literacy promotes spiritual growth by putting us in touch with the journeys into suffering, joy and understanding undertaken by humans before us and their expressions through art and religious practice - the workshops were concrete examples of this, the journey with Job in the *dare2engage* workshop being a particularly powerful example. The point was reflected in the phrase of one delegate that religions are ‘the nursery schools of spirituality’.

### **Conclusions:**

The conference was the site of rich and continuing discussions on the relationship between spirituality and religion. There was less likelihood of finding agreement about this - positions were based on fundamentally different understandings of what spirituality is - than about its expressions and its importance to our fulfilment as human beings. According to those who held a religious view of spirituality it must be given a place within religious education or else the pupils’ understanding of religion will be incomplete if not distorted; in the opinion of all there needs to be space within education for spirituality for the full and rounded development of the child.

#### **a) Spirituality and inter-disciplinarity**

##### **Context:**

In the national curriculum and its current revision, spiritual development is the first of the SMSC (spiritual, moral, social cultural development) elements of learning and has an interdisciplinary nature intended to be included across school subjects. Spirituality here is understood in general terms; outside RE this spiritual development need not have specific reference to religious thought or experience. Unlike education for spiritual development, religious education has the status of a discrete curriculum subject. There have, however,

been waves of enthusiasm in recent years for more comprehensive cross-curricular learning (particularly in primary education but also in lower secondary) whereby subjects like RE are combined with other subjects within the same lessons. The value of this approach is that it acknowledges the interconnectedness of different areas of learning; the downside is that subjects such as RE that often do not have high status in school can easily disappear in a cross-curricular medley or the subject-specific concepts and skills are lost. Currently the trend is away from cross-curricular learning.

**Conference:**

The conference focused on spirituality and religious literacy not across the curriculum but in RE in particular. While the keynote speaker made reference to SMSC requirements across the curriculum her main focus was on learning in religious education. The workshops involved content that had been and/or could be taught in RE lessons (or in one case in mosque classes) and those invited to attend were largely from the RE profession or had a particular interest in RE. An aim of the conference is to feed into the current review of the RE curriculum.

**Conversations:**

As delegates discussed the relationship between spirituality and religious learning (in group conversations and conference feedback) they often brought together, and sometimes blurred, distinctions between cross-curricular learning and subject learning. This perhaps reflects the different understandings of the relationship between religion and spirituality (see (a) above). Three approaches (at least) can be identified in the discussions.

(i) The first gives primacy to spirituality and sees it spilling out beyond the 'bounds' of religion into other curriculum areas. One delegate spoke of his own initiatives promoting SMSC outside what he understands to be religion's 'confines'; another of the 'need to explore the spirituality aspect outside any particular religion'; a third of 'a missing dimension ... the spiritual resources of modern science for human spiritual growth and responsible action'. In this last example it was not clear whether this 'missing dimension' should be taught by the RE teacher or the science teacher. One of the discussion groups debated whether RE should deal with a general spirituality or with specifically religious spiritualities leaving teachers of other subjects to deal with spiritual elements in their own discipline.

(ii) A second approach considers how learning about the spiritual aspect of religion can be enhanced by including other curriculum elements. Inspired in particular by art work in the Sacred Spaces workshop, some recommended that creative approaches from different disciplines could be brought into the service of RE and used to promote religious literacy; they wanted to 'incorporate other curriculum elements into RE learning', suggested, 'using art and other forms of creativity to promote religious literacy', 'using cross-curricular links more when teaching 'RE' – i.e. Arts, Music, History, Literacy and expertise from these fields'.

(iii) A third approach saw RE and religious literacy as having a value to the wider school outside the RE lesson. One declared, 'we need to break out of the silo and dialogue with other subjects'. Questions asked in the conference feedback included 'what is RE's contribution to learning processes across the curriculum' and what were 'the opportunities for RE and religious literacy underpinning the school ethos, values and curriculum'.

**Conclusions:**

There was some ambiguity then firstly about RE's place within the school, and whether it has a cross-curricular, extra-curricular remit, and secondly about the content of RE, whether it should engage just with religious phenomena or with things spiritual understood very broadly. Discussions around these themes raise important questions about the wider aims of education in our schools. Too broad an understanding of RE's role, however, could result in a blurring of its character as an academic subject with specific content and skills in its own right thus weakening its position in arguments for giving it higher status in a revised curriculum. The approach of the conference where the spirituality element was presented both as part of the subject content of learning *about* religions and as something from which young people could gain something of value for their own spiritual development (learning *from*) is perhaps a way to combine academic integrity with broader educational outcomes.

**b) Spirituality in a context of plurality****Context:**

Religious education in England not only draws content from a number of different religious traditions but also is delivered to pupils with a variety of religions and non-religious positions of their own. The question of how to teach a multi-faith RE and respect the religious integrity of each child is constant - there is a related concern about engaging children in class activities which verge on the devotional rather than academic. One way of addressing this question is to present a purely factual and 'objective' account of the histories, beliefs and practices of different religions, but English RE has traditionally held to a holistic understanding of education expressed in its combination of learning *about* and learning *from*.

The requirement for RE (as for other curriculum subjects) to provide opportunities for spiritual development is another reason why a facts-based approach is not enough. One way in which educators have tried to promote spiritual development while respecting the integrity of their diverse pupils has been to adopt an approach to spirituality that is not religion-specific – the universalised and individualised approaches advocated by Hay and others with an emphasis on finding one's innate spirituality within. These approaches have in turn been viewed as exclusive of some religious positions, their focus on the individual and interiority being in tension with more communal and transcendent spiritualities in different faith traditions. They also fail to do justice to the rich spiritual resources found within religious traditions from which through history people from outside as well as from inside those traditions have found inspiration and support; the 'dialogue of religious experience' between different faiths is one of the mainstays of inter religious engagement. This is not to say however that this sharing of spiritual insights across religious traditions is without its own problems and challenges.

**Conference:**

The conference was in its conception and in the contributions of its speakers (Kate Christopher and Bishop Richard) committed to a holistic understanding of education (literacy *and* spirituality). Within this understanding it set out to present spirituality from inside religious traditions, specifically the three Abrahamic traditions, Judaism, Christianity

and Islam. It aimed to open up the rich spiritual resources of these faiths, to broaden the understanding of spirituality by looking at different approaches to the spiritual within them and to give delegates the opportunity to explore through experience and discussion the potential as well as the problems such activities might pose in the RE class. The conference was organised by the Christian Muslim Forum, a forum committed to the sharing of experiences and insights across religions. The very setting of the conference, Westminster Abbey, was not neutral but charged with the spirituality of a particular religious tradition.

### **Conversations:**

From their feedback and conversations it is evident that many of the delegates saw the conference as an opportunity for inter religious engagement and sharing of insights across faiths; the facilitators and delegates were from a variety of religious traditions. A commitment to inter faith dialogue was evident in questions such as: 'how can I personally improve inter faith relations' and 'what personal contribution can I make to interfaith/ intercommunal dialogue'. Learning to dialogue with other traditions was viewed as an important area of work for RE. In relation to spirituality in particular, comments appreciated the opportunity to listen to 'speakers from other faiths and their interpretation of 'spirituality' and the 'further highlighting of communal similarities and how much we can learn from each other'.

The transferability of ideas and insights was another point for discussion; one delegate claimed to take away from the conference 'sharing spirituality across faiths ideas'. The fact that several delegates reported feeling 'inspired' by the day suggests such an experience of shared spirituality. This awareness of sharing spirituality was expressed by those who engaged in the Sacred Spaces workshop. This session reported a project in which Muslim pupils from a mosque school related to art in their local cathedral; it involved the facilitator's own reflections on what he as a Muslim leader and teacher had gained himself from this experience and how he viewed his own sacred space differently as a result. Christians attending the Jewish texts workshops found new meanings and deeper significance through Jewish interpretive methods applied to what were for them familiar texts. One teacher immediately set about devising ways of introducing these methodologies to her sixth formers in a Roman Catholic school. In other cases experiences of a workshop encouraged a desire to spread approaches to spirituality further, but left open for exploration how this might be effected; convinced of 'the value of meditation for children in the classroom' one delegate took away the question 'how can meditation practices be more widely diffused in an interfaith context?', and another 'how to develop spirituality from each religion for the teachers and children ... to enrich and enable children in our society today'.

The problem that most exercised the delegates in this regard was not so much inter faith learning and sharing, but the question of how to engage non-religious pupils, 'how to relate to children without religious background', 'how do we keep the integrity of non-faith children and learners'. One delegate in his professional role had already decided that the answer was to try to develop children's spirituality through activities 'that are not centred on religions' as 'for many young people their own inherent spirituality may have nothing at all to do with religions *per se*'. Others were more interested in finding a bridge between non-religious perspectives and spirituality from religious traditions. In the Sacred Spaces

workshop delegates noted the firm starting point the Muslim children had in their own faith as they engaged with Christian sacred spaces and discussed what might be the starting point for non-religious students – did they have a ‘sacred space’ from which they could travel to the ‘sacred spaces’ of different religious traditions? One particular issue, described by one group as ‘the elephant in the classroom’ was ‘talking about God’; whether and in what way this could be done in non-confessional settings. From the workshops it was evident that acknowledgement of God gave the activities particular spiritual meaning and power. The spiritual force of the wrestling with text in the Jewish workshop came from recognition that this was God’s word and so in effect the interpreter was wrestling with Him; the Christian meditation workshop was described by a delegate as ‘use of meditation to focus children and encourage them to “be with God”’. As one group stated ‘religion leads to talking about God, to relating to God’ so a spirituality rooted in religious traditions necessarily has reference to God.

### **Conclusions:**

The experience of the delegates as people of different religious traditions engaging with different traditions, and other aspects of their own, demonstrated the power of sharing spiritual insights across religions. The dangers of blurring the boundaries between educational activity (whether learning *about* or *from*) and worship were not raised in the discussions. A more problematic question appeared to be the challenge of respecting the integrity of young people with a ‘non-faith’ background in spiritual learning without compromising the religiously-grounded and God-oriented spirituality of other students. Whatever the answer, it is important not to disadvantage students by cutting them off from the rich expressions of human spirituality of the religious traditions or from what the keynote speaker called ‘the power of human yearning for the divine’, which the non-religious too can claim as part of their story and heritage as human beings.

### **c) Spiritual engagement and intellectual rigour**

#### **Context:**

There has been a long-standing tension between experiential, spirituality-focused RE and critical, cognitive approaches to RE; recently critical approaches have dominated. There are several reasons why this might be the case: an increased focus generally on critical thinking skills across the curriculum; a concern to demonstrate that RE is not a ‘soft’ subject; anxiety to avoid anything that might seem like ‘indoctrination’; the inclusion of secular worldviews in RE; the encouragement of more critical approaches to religion in schools after 9/11 and 7/7. One consequence of recent trends, particularly in secondary RE, has been an inclination to adopt an arm’s length relationship with religion viewing it objectively from the outside. With secondary students in particular the ‘learning *from*’ element of religious education is increasingly understood in terms of the development of critical thinking skills rather than spiritual development. Philosophical approaches are used to assess propositional beliefs (such as whether God exists, if there is any evidence for miracles) or issues-based approaches present religions as generators of societal questions for debate (such as the merits or otherwise of faith schools or of arranged marriage). Another development in RE, spanning back over several decades, has been the decline of scriptural studies in the subject partly on the grounds of perceived difficulty and lack of interest to young people in a secular

and religiously plural context. This means there is less engagement with the central sources of religious traditions, their beliefs and spirituality.

**Conference:**

The conference went against some of these recent trends in religious education by deliberately plunging participants into the middle of religious traditions rather than leaving them on the edge. They were encouraged to engage with elements that were at the core of the religious lives of people of faith and to mirror some of their practices: to accompany Job in his conversations with God; to take part in Christian meditation; to journey with past pilgrims to the Abbey; to wrestle with the Jewish scriptures.

**Conversations:**

The engaged character of the workshops meant that participants were involved in experiential learning; some reported the kind of manifestations of spiritual learning encouraged in experiential approaches to RE - a sense of 'awe' and 'wonder' inspired by the abbey, the 'spiritual vibrations' of the Sacred Spaces project with Muslim children, the 'power of the story of Job', the 'quality of relationships' in the collaborative scriptural interpretation, the 'space for contemplation' provided by the Christian meditation workshop. One of the delegates wrote of response at a 'sensory level' to the workshop experiences on offer. What was noticeable in several of the feedback forms was that the spirituality they were exploring did not rest at a 'soft' skills or 'feel-good' experience but rather included the 'rigour' that one participant recorded as being particularly important - participants found their journey with Job challenging, and the interpretation of the Jewish texts required hard thinking.

One comment suggested that involvement in the workshops and discussions did not really engage with the religious; it questioned 'whether 'religious literacy' is a viable concept' and claimed, 'what was discussed related primarily to "spiritual literacy" not to "religious literacy"'. Other comments however gave a different impression. Reporting on the *dare2engage* workshop participants felt they were really 'tuning in' to Job's experience; as they spoke of the stark images, the dark and light, the metaphorical aspects, of 'going through the story and coming out the other side' as a 'redemptive' experience, they were not just *feeling* but also *interpreting* in a way that brought their experience in line with broader religious meanings. Working in the other direction, the intellectual activity and conversation involved in the study of Jewish religious text took on a spiritual dimension as participants engaged in an active, dynamic process of interpretation likened to 'wrestling with God' and found deeper significance in what were for many familiar texts within their own Christian tradition. In both examples cognitive and spiritual, and religious and spiritual came together. In these cases it could be said participants were thinking *with* the religious traditions rather than *about* them.

Given the marked decline of scriptural studies in secondary schools it is striking that the Jewish texts workshop was particularly highly rated by participants. Three put the session down as highlight of the conference and seven cited their learning from this workshop as one of the two ideas they will take away from the conference. They appreciated, 'new ways at looking at sacred texts from a Jewish perspective' and a 'creative, dialogical and open

hermeneutic of texts in RE' and would like to continue the process with 'more, exciting textual analysis'.

**Conclusions:**

The participants' responses to the workshops showed the power of direct engagement with the spiritual riches of religious traditions. They also showed that cognitive and experiential elements do not have to be in tension with each other but can be brought together in a way that combines 'spiritual vibrations' with intellectual rigour. The dynamic and engaged nature of their involvement meant they were *learning with* as well as *learning about* and *learning from* the religious traditions.

**d) The 'condition of RE' question**

**Context:**

The status of RE as a school subject is of grave concern to the RE world at the moment. In schools it often receives less curriculum time than other comparable subjects such as History; it was excluded from the group of core subjects in government plans for the English Baccalaureate; it is not one of 'facilitating subjects' on the Russell Group universities' list of favoured A levels for university entrance. At the same time the condition of RE is not such as to give confidence to policy makers and universities or encourage a higher valuation of the subject. Recent Ofsted reports and research studies have shown some confusion in the aims and purposes of the subject. It has to some degree become subservient to other agenda such as the Community Cohesion and Prevent agendas, rather than having its own justification – an insecure basis for the subject as fashions and foci change. Not least, as a recent all-party parliamentary report has confirmed, there is a serious shortage of specialist RE teachers in the subject. Many students in secondary schools are taught RE by non-specialists - some of whom not only have little knowledge of but also little sympathy for religion – and a high number of primary school pupils are taught RE by teaching assistants rather than teachers. The use of teaching assistants does not necessarily mean the quality of RE is low but it gives some indication of the status of the subject in these schools.

**Conference:**

This conference was planned in the context and light of this current 'RE crisis'. The conference themes, spirituality and religious literacy are elements that are viewed as integral to the subject and so they highlight what is distinctive about the subject's contribution to learning rather than ways in which it might be utilised to serve other agenda. An aim is to show that RE does have an important place in the revised curriculum with religion's particular contribution to 'the best that has been thought and said' and to 'human creativity and achievement'.

**Conversations:**

An image used in the keynote was picked up by one delegate as a useful metaphor for religious education: "building a cathedral by chipping away" – eyes on the grand vision *and* the detailed steps on the way'. There was a feeling in the discussion groups that RE needs a 'grand vision', a 'refocusing', as well as more detailed practical strategies to attain it. One comment was that an 'RE for all seasons' was needed; it could not rely on external events and political agenda (such as the post 9/11 interest in the subject) to provide its

justification. It was felt that schools needed more guidance and input to get RE on the right track: 'how can we make a stronger input to the RE study and the guidelines given to schools'; 'can we have a range of examples of what religious literacy is within RE?' The quality of RE teaching resources was perceived to be an issue: 'How can teaching material available to primary and secondary RE teachers be of the best quality?'

Delegates frequently mentioned the issue of non-specialist RE teachers, aware that whatever recommendations are made for the improvement of RE it will stand or fall on the quality of teaching staff and their commitment to their subject: 'it begins with the knowledge and experience of staff'; there is a 'need for teacher competence'; '[we need] teachers who know what they are doing'. Training and in-service training of teachers was seen as essential: 'training/mentoring needed [as] a resource for non-specialists for non-religious teachers'; '[we] need to upskill the teachers to give them the heart the soul the passion'. And for all this 'time and money' is required.

The status of the subject was much discussed. It was understood to be a marginalised subject: 'how can the culture of marginalising the teaching of RE be changed?' Indicators of this were its failure to be recognised as a status A level subject by Russell Group universities and the lack of a core national RE syllabus. There was the hope that and the question whether the conference and its report might make a difference to government thinking: 'how will this make a difference to government thinking?'; 'how do we influence government decision and support for RE?'

#### **Conclusion:**

The thrust of the conference's concern for RE was not just that it should be given more recognition and higher status by the government and schools, but that it should improve in its quality and become more sure in its focus so as to merit this recognition and status – that it should become a subject worth fighting for. In order to achieve this higher quality, more money for training and resourcing specialist teachers is required and to generate that kind of support there needs to be a clearly articulated vision of what RE is and why it is important. It is hoped that the presentations, experiences and discussions of this conference have something to contribute to this definition.

## APPENDIX TWO: REFORM OF THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM IN ENGLAND: CONSULTATION RESPONSE FORM

*From the Christian Muslim Forum*

This response is sent on behalf of the Christian Muslim Forum and has come about as an outcome of a major conference held at Westminster Abbey on March 14<sup>th</sup> 2013, entitled *Religious Literacy and Spirituality*. The conference explored these two concepts in detail and this response has been written by Julian Bond, Director CMF, and Maurice Irfan Coles, Muslim education specialist and his counterpart, Dr Julia Ipgrave Christian education specialist.

### **A Place for RE in the current Curriculum Review?**

Our submission is based upon a synopsis of a major Christian Muslim Forum (CMF) conference held on March 14<sup>th</sup> 2013 at Westminster Abbey. Entitled *Religious Literacy and Spirituality*, the conference aimed to explore the definitions and dynamic between the two. The conference organisers, Julian Bond, Director of the CMF, Julia Ipgrave CMF Christian Education specialist and senior research fellow at the University of Warwick, and Maurice Irfan Coles, CEO of the CoEd Foundation and CMF Muslim education specialist, have extrapolated the relevant key points from the final report.

- We are aware that the particular status of RE as part of the basic curriculum but not of the National Curriculum, and as locally determined, means that it has not been given a place in the National Curriculum review on a par with other humanities subjects. Although RE has been given mention within the document we would welcome greater emphasis in the revised National Curriculum on the status of RE as an academic subject alongside National Curriculum subjects such as History and Geography.
- We recognise that, while there are examples of excellent RE practice and teaching, there is currently a widespread lack of confidence in the subject and its direction. A major reason for this is the significant shortage of specialist teachers in secondary schools and frequent delegation of the subject to teaching assistants in primary schools (*The Truth Unmasked: the All Party Parliamentary Group on RE Report 2013*). Lack of resources for the subject and ambivalence about its direction have been noted in inspection reports (*Transforming religious education, Religious education in schools 2006 - 09, Ofsted 2010*) and in some recent academic research (notably the University of Glasgow's project *Does RE Work?* funded by the UK research council). This lack of confidence may be a contributing factor in the exclusion of RE from the Russell Group universities' 'facilitating subjects' for university entrance.
- At the same time we are conscious of a concerning religious illiteracy in society at a time when religion has become prominent in public consciousness; public debate is often ill-informed leading to misunderstanding, a hardening of positions and damaging polarisation of religious and secular perspectives. As leading sociologist Grace Davie has recently noted, 'At precisely the moment that we need them most, we are losing the vocabulary, concepts and narratives that are necessary to talk intelligently about religion.' (Grace Davie, *Westminster Debates* May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012)

- We recommend that decisions about RE's future place in curriculum are not made on the basis of its current difficulties but on its potential as an academic subject to address the concerning issue of religious illiteracy in society, on the particular contribution it has to offer to the study of 'the best that has been thought and said' and (because of the inspiration that religion has provided for the flourishing of culture) to the 'appreciation of human creativity and achievement' (3.1 *2013 Draft Curriculum*). We are convinced that RE also has a particular offer to make to the cross-curricular theme of spiritual development. Examples of strategies for rigorous RE that combines knowledge, understanding and opportunities for spiritual development were explored in our *Religious Literacy and Spirituality* conference.
- We acknowledge that reform to the subject, its resourcing and teaching force, is needed in order for RE to be in a position to make these valuable contributions to the curriculum and to our young people's knowledge, understanding and personal development. The reforms require the commitment of time and money and most importantly the recruitment of enthusiastic, high quality teachers; this commitment and recruitment are dependent on recognition of RE's future value and its status within the curriculum as a whole. Therefore we urge that RE be given a significant place in discussion, guidance, policy and planning for curriculum reform and its potential recognised.



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