

HOW IMPORTANT ARE SECONDARY SCHOOL VISITS TO THE MOSQUE IN THE POST 9/11 WORLD?

(To go or not to go,
that is the question)

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Synopsis of Argument



- ▶ Current thinking in the RE world is that *religious literacy/intercultural competence*, is important in the post 9/11 landscape. We can teach about religion and belief in the classroom, but it is well documented that *experiential* learning and learning outside the classroom is very effective. In order to understand the religion of *Islam* better, teachers can organise a visit to the local mosque, as long as the conditions are right. However, organising a visit to a mosque can be problematic and *controversial* for teachers, so why put extra time and effort into organising one if it is not compulsory? The answer is that a visit, if organised well, can change perceptions of students in a *positive* way and contribute to religious literacy as well as community cohesion and the *SMSC* agenda.

All of the recently published documents support this view eg OFSTED, RE for Real etc Joy's chapter documenting and analysing visits to the synagogue supports this. SMSC remains a key indicator, for OFSTED, in judging the overall effectiveness of the school. (p 10 Plymouth Agreed Syllabus).

Background

- ▶ Own experience
- ▶ Experience of others
- ▶ Lack of research
- ▶ Importance/Relevance
- ▶ Quote:
 - ▶ "I don't want my daughter to meet *those people*" / I don't want my son going to *that place*"



Own experience

I have visited several mosques in this country and abroad and always found the experience useful in terms of learning. Always been welcomed warmly. When training to be an RE teacher, visiting places of worship was one the best way of learning about the religion. This was evidenced by an evaluative feedback form undertaken by all students and analysed by the tutor in order to justify the considerable funding needed to allow visits to places of worship all over the country. A very valuable part of the course was to organise the visits ourselves in groups to emulate a school visit. This showed how much work needs to go into planning a visit and how problematic it can be. Funnily enough, my journey in becoming an RE teacher started when I organised a training session for staff at a leisure centre in Plymouth which included a faith speaker from the Islamic community and first met Jonathan Marshall of the Plymouth Centre for Faiths and Cultural Diversity who ultimately inspired me to become an RE teacher.

Experience of others

1. SACRE – Head of a primary school in Plymouth had 50% of pupils withdraw from a recent trip to the local mosque. One parent started a campaign and it spread. This is despite the Head herself being a muslim and having a school meeting to explain what the visit was about. "parents are the biggest problem".

Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Education

- ▶ This in itself is controversial, as some teachers would argue that it is not the job of the RE Department to promote the SMSC agenda, but a whole school initiative. However, the fact remains that RE teachers can make a significant contribution to this agenda, which in turn can help schools gain good OFSTED inspection judgements. A recent analysis carried out by Mark Dearden of the University of St Mark and St John and presented to the Plymouth SACRE showed that schools, inspected in the 2014-2015 academic year, were highly praised for work which provided "opportunities for pupils to develop social, moral, spiritual and cultural skills".

SMSC

- ▶ A couple of the inspection judgements specifically mentioned the value of visits:
 - ▶ “A wide variety of trips, visitors, and events are organised by the school to ensure that the curriculum is stimulating and engaging,.. SMSC provision is strong”.
 - ▶ “The school's commitment to equal opportunities is particularly evident in the high priority it places on the pupils' SMSC development. Through assemblies, local visits and trips, they are able to gain a better understanding of themselves and the local community.”

The issues – why are mosque visits controversial?

LOCAL ISSUES

- Health and safety
- Finance
- Profile of RE



Health and safety – copious amount of paperwork to do with risk assessments that are associated with outside visits. A visit to the mosque will be closely scrutinised by SLT. Parents sometimes refuse permission.

Finance – many schools do not have a budget for visits to places of worship and so contributions need to be sought from families, some of whom will find it difficult to fund such trips. Also, staff need to be covered when out of school.

Profile – often the profile of RE is low in a school and permission to miss other lessons, such as English and Maths for a day trip out to a place of worship may not be sanctioned by SLT.

The issues – why is this controversial?

National

- ▶ Terrorism
- ▶ Media
- ▶ Prevent
- ▶ Pedagogy



Terrorism – this could not be more topical. 9/11, 7/7, terrorist connections of Finsbury Park Mosque, Lee Rigby, Russian air crash, Paris attacks,
Media – “we are in a society where most people are taught nothing about Islam while being bombarded by the media with sensationalised, negative images of Arabs and Muslims” p 81 Van Driel

Prevent – since the summer there is a new duty on schools as part of this strategy. A visit to the mosque could contribute to a school’s duty in this area but not everyone might see it in this way.

Pedagogy – non specialists lack confidence in teaching about controversial subjects (OFSTED RE for Real)

RE Online encourages teachers to take students on visits, “learning inside the classroom is enhanced by learning outside it” and dedicates many pages to help teachers to organise outside visits.

RE teachers need to think carefully about HOW they are going to tackle teaching about world faiths. One approach, which I have used successfully is Bob Jackson’s interpretative approach. This seeks to support religious literacy.

Browser tabs: Liverpool Hope University, ALISON, Student/Staff Gateway - Liver..., Employability Bulletin 26/11/2..., Inter cultural competence - ...

Mail interface: Liverpool Hope University logo, search bar, navigation icons, 3 of 40 items.

Compose button and sidebar menu: Inbox (2), Starred, Sent Mail, Drafts (2), Notes, rel:ll articles, More.

Chat section: ALISON search bar, "No recent chats. Start a new one" button.

Message content:

Good to hear from you. Please give my very best wishes to Joy!

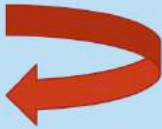
I am so glad that you found Signposts a helpful document.

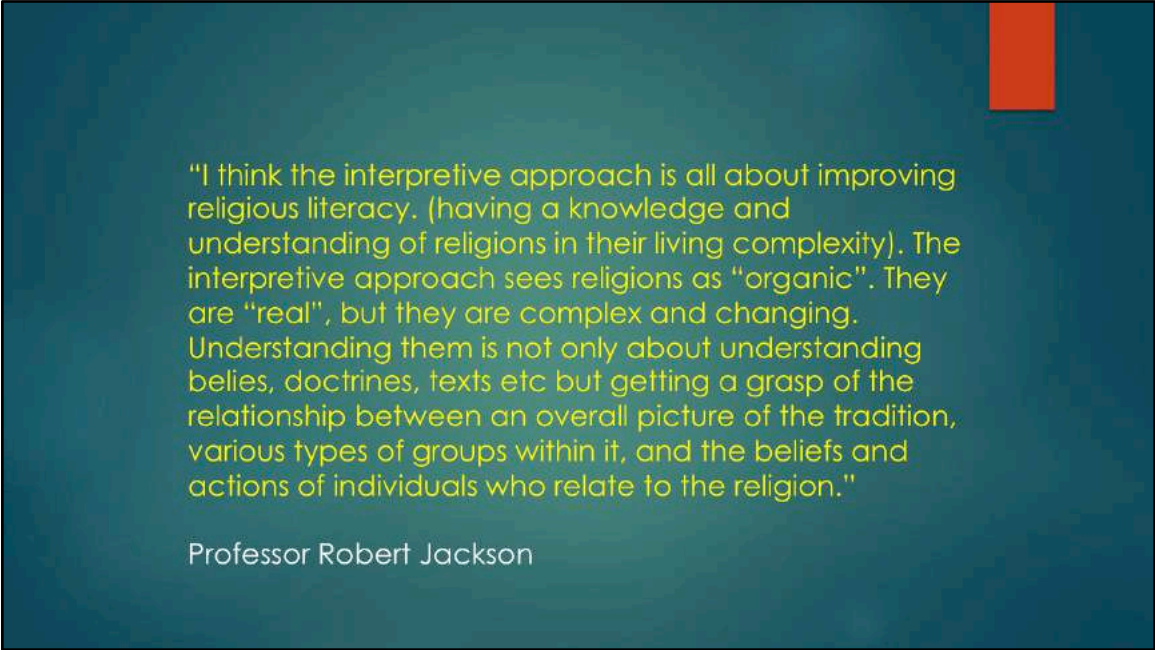
As you will realise from my comments about terminology in Signposts, so many of the terms we use in our work are used in different ways by different people. This is partly due to national tradition, and partly to different perspectives even within the same discipline in the same country. For example, Adam Dinham's use of the term religious literacy is quite different from that used by Marius Felderhof in his various writings. For Felderhof, as I read him, religious literacy implies initiation into a religion. Dinham's use of the term closely resembles that of the American writer Diane Moore, and is about having a knowledge and understanding of religions in their living complexity. Andrew Wright, however, some time ago appropriated the term for his own work (which he called 'the religious literacy approach,' which he would contrast with my interpretive approach). Wright's view sees religions as 'wholes', and with a specific type of critical realist epistemology attached to it. I tend not to use the term religious literacy myself much because of its association with Andrew Wright's particular approach in the minds of some readers who are aware of the debates between Andrew and myself in the past.

I think the interpretive approach is all about improving religious literacy (in the Moore sense). The interpretive approach sees religions as 'organic'. They are 'real', but they are complex and changing. Understanding them is not only about understanding beliefs, doctrines, texts et cetera but getting a grasp of the relationship between an overall picture of the tradition (or religion as a whole - which might include a study of key texts, doctrines et cetera), various types of groups within it (denominations, sects, movements et cetera), and the beliefs and actions of individuals who relate to the religion. This does not imply that religions are not 'real' or 'social facts', or that religions do not have sources of authority; it is just that they are complex. (Andy Wright and Philip Barnes brand me as postmodernist, who thinks that religious claims are neither true nor false, but my position does not imply this at all!)

It is interesting how terminology appears and is used in the work of the Council of Europe. When I was first invited to take part, there was no educational work being done on religion, very much because of the French idea of laïcité - the idea that religion belongs in the private rather than the public sphere. 9/11 prompted a change in Council of Europe policy and they started to bring studies of religions into their educational projects. Because their work focuses on the fields of human rights education, education for democratic citizenship and intercultural education, the new work on religion had to be placed somewhere. Thus education about religions (and later also non-religious convictions) was included under the broad umbrella of intercultural education. There is ongoing work in the Council of Europe on the idea of intercultural competence (it is well worth keeping track

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Professor Robert Jackson

Why is it important to deal with controversial issues in RE?

- ▶ DFE encourage teachers to discuss not ignore issues such as Islamic terrorism under the PREVENT strategy.
- ▶ Students usually are interested in these issues and are ready to learn more.
- ▶ Teaching can compensate for the way issues are presented in the media.



Newly published advice from the Association for Citizenship Teaching has proved useful here.

RE for REal report recommends that there should be a focus in contemporary issues and the role of religion and belief in current affairs and controversies.

David Hay suggests it is the RE teachers duty to “counter narrowing influences” and encourage students to see things from a different perspective.

Summary

- ▶ The teaching of RE has never been so important.
- ▶ Pupils can gain a great deal from visits to local places of worship and a visit to the local mosque can, **if the conditions are right**, be of great benefit to religious literacy and community cohesion.
- ▶ These trips are not necessarily easy to organise and usually have to be done in teachers own time. There are several different types of **barriers** to be overcome from within and without the school.
- ▶ Experience shows that a successful trip will be remembered far longer than a lesson in the classroom and can have a lasting effect in ensuring students are skilled intercultural navigators and are religiously literate.
- ▶ It is important to ensure that the trip is part of a scheme of work and is complemented by work in the classroom and that students and staff are well prepared for such a visit.

My portfolio will show the logistics of a visit including letters to parents, preparatory work in the classroom and so on.

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- ▶ Save RE Facebook group

Obama's visit to the mosque in Baltimore

