

EFTRE Conference in Rome

24 August – 27 August 2023

Bridges over Troubled Waters – RE in changing times

Thank you for inviting me back again for a fifth (!) time to offer some reflections on the EFTRE conference. I had to check. My first time as rapporteur was Bruges - 2010. Then it was Malmo - 2013. Vienna in 2016 and Dublin in 2019. It must be time for someone else.

I have some pictures. I can't guarantee they are all flattering but I hope they're not too bad. Sorry if I missed anyone! [now available here:

www.dropbox.com/sh/9rmcpv637a0io5e/AACSIrdtcJdG_mzwVi0a65qba?dl=0]

As always, I must apologise for the inevitably partial account of the talks, seminars, presentations and visits and for any misunderstandings of what I saw and heard. At this week's conference in Roma, we have been treated to a wonderful time, with fantastic experiences and opportunities to learn so much from our colleagues, in a truly magnificent setting. I really congratulate Orazio and Sonja and the staff here, and all the EFTRE executive for an amazing conference.

At previous conferences I talked about the need, in so many schools, to supplement the ordinary curriculum with a more democratic kind of RE, perhaps taking place out-of-school-hours, in break times, lunch time, after school or in the holidays. This could be a Philosophy and Religion Club, where pupils discuss deep questions and issues that may not be covered in regular RE lessons. Working with teaching colleagues, including Ed Pawson, I developed a series of sessions called 'Solarity', to indicate the light of the sun falling on that of which pupils may be entirely ignorant. The sessions, for primary and secondary pupils is published on the www.solarity.org.uk website.

Last time, in Dublin, I spoke about a project Denise and I are still involved with: 'The Big Ideas for RE - ways of choosing and organising the content of RE. You can find all our work done since then, practically a whole curriculum of ideas for pupils aged 5 - 18 at <https://bigideasforre.org/>

...And now to our current conference in Rome. 'Bridges'... 'Troubled waters'... 'Changing times'. How have our keynote speakers and workshop leaders helped us here? Let's look at the troubled waters of the world today: war in Europe; 'identity fundamentalism' on the rise; abuse of power flooding through many lands; a tsunami of environmental destruction leading to global climate change disaster. Social influencers and conspiracy theorists making fortunes and/or creating chaos. How can education and religious education in particular, help students navigate an increasingly complex and increasingly digital world? 'One dog barks at nothing,' says a Japanese proverb, 'and ten thousand others pass it on.'

My key question for you is, *'In RE, what do we do to help keep people out of bad lives?'* I leave the definition of 'bad lives' open, partly because it's not for me to judge who has a 'bad' life or not, but you can imagine the sorts of things that are barriers to a good and fulfilling life: people living in desperate situations, or about to fall into such situations;

young people on a path leading to trouble with the justice system; people vulnerable to harms of various sorts. We cannot solve all this in RE of course, but our theme is bridges over troubled waters and changing times: what is our contribution without which people would be worse off?

In Orazio's welcome address he talked about many barriers and the need for bridges. There is war in Europe again - but a desire for solidarity. But unity not enough on its own because there are many different contexts. Civil society needs a fair world. SNADIR addresses issues of social justice. This conference is part of it. And this is certainly a contribution to keeping people out of bad lives.

Much of this was reflected in Maria Raspatelli's opening talk. You could see why she won her global teacher award; such fire and love she clearly brings to the children in her classes. Challenging the ways things were always done in the past, and inspiring them with projects that make sense to them today. I loved hearing about the student radio and tv productions, encouraging children to experiment, discuss, problem solve, collaborate in relation to some of those things that cause people's lives to be worse than they might otherwise be. Social and religious differences are tackled for example. Here is religious education generating hope.

Keynotes

Our keynote speeches also addressed my question about keeping people out of bad lives. Andrea Porcarelli showed how Teaching of the Catholic Religion (TCR) has undergone something of an evolution, with interreligious dialogue a key factor in the mix today. I was struck by how this development is challenging what we might call 'identity fundamentalism' - softening the hard edges of those who would force us into an 'Us and Them' mentality. He spoke of Pluralism involving real encounter and dialogue.

People's different traditions were not just to be 'tolerated' but engaged with. There is a long way to go, but Andrea's proposals offer much hope for TCR to involve a genuine occasion for interreligious dialogue.

Kathryn Wright also identified threats of division in the RE world, and demonstrated how bridges may be built across the policy-practice divide for example. We may have ideals and policies to fit, but how can we make it work? Kathryn's programme with the St Gabriel's Trust has already involved thousands of teachers in doing just that.

She spoke of the importance of firm foundations: drawing on the best of the past, but seeking new ways of applying to today. Her highly impressive programme of events and courses include projects on how religion and worldviews are engaging with the climate crisis, a case study engaging the Sikh community in Leeds & Bradford and a project addressing the policy -practice divide around the theme of freedom of religion or belief (FORB).

I think I need to know more about her ideas on hospitality as a paradigm for progress here. Who is the host and who is the guest? Who is offering an embrace and who is being asked to accept or reject it? What if I say no thanks? So there are questions in my mind

about power relations here, but I get the point about working on the relationship between those who might otherwise be marginalised. And it was good that Norman noted that Kathryn had her own 'fan' club here in very hot Rome.

We are over the worst of the Covid pandemic, but it, or something like it, may well return again. The joint presentation by Bianca, Eszter, Sonja and Tania was fascinating. Their study of RE specialists from EFTRE showed impacts of the pandemic on the lives of pupils and teachers and how, for many, RE became more relevant. Many aspects of life, social skills and relationships, as well as teaching methods, had to be re-evaluated, and there were even some improvements in teacher and student well-being.

Some teachers and students had to think again about what really matters in life, which, after all, is at the heart of our subject. RE teachers had a special contribution to make and some, like Sonja, went out of their way to support individual students who were struggling with the return to school after time in lockdown. Another way in which we can help children and young people from descending into what might become a 'bad' life.

And our final keynote from Angelos Vallianatos looking at RE in relation to democracy, revealed that RE can help pupils *experience* democracy in action, not just learn about it. I liked this presentation very much, because surely, where representative democracy is healthy, this will help to keep people out of 'bad lives'. For where people have no voice, and feel powerless in the face of authoritarian leaders, terrible consequences inevitably follow. Angelos reminded us of the terrible terrorist attacks in the world and the backlash against anyone with Asian heritage being accused of being a terrorist in the USA after 9/11 and in many other places as well. Good RE, with honest political statements can play a part in prevent these easy stereotypes. But despite efforts to take this forward, those with power and something to lose often stand in the way of progress.

In schools we need, not just individuals dealing with issues, but also governance and policy and cooperation with the community. As Angelos said, 'Democracy needs to be taught and experienced.' And this may be helped if RE is taught more like a language than as history. Students need to learn the grammar of religious coexistence and the syntax of religious expression.

Visits

A large group of us went to the Catacomb of San Sebastian: people on this trip nearly descended, not into the catacombs, but the bad life of waiting for a bus that never comes. But we all practised patience, the bus came, and we had a very interesting dive into levels of Roman history. There we saw the tomb of San Sebastian. Did he live a bad life? There was a lot of pain and suffering in his life, but was that not outweighed by the bravery of a life lived for freedom to practice his faith?

The visit to Santa Maria di Trastevere and to the Sant'Egidio community provided us with an example of a religiously inspired group which directly addresses the problem of what we might call a bad life; people in often desperate straits.

They started with a daily prayer and then a service to the poor and for the migrant. And now also to the elderly, and to peace building in Africa. For them it is the Bible in one hand and

the newspaper in the other, and students can learn something here of the inspiration and resilience that many people derive from their faith.

Workshops

I managed to dip into several but not all workshops - sorry Sonja, but thank you for talking to me personally about your session. I can see how your work, like that of our Big Ideas for RE project, is reaching out to those children who have no particular religious background or experience - an increasing number across Europe. These children must not be excluded from a religion and worldviews or perhaps 'life views' education, and your work on sacred text, in this case the story Jesus told of the Lost Son, demonstrates how all children can be given an experience that will help them feel - and thus appreciate - the real relevance of RE for themselves.

First, I attended Marlene Printz Jellesen's workshop examining the impact of narratives of secularisation on RE. This was an excellent session with activities and a very helpful handout outlining four common secularist narratives that can present difficulties for RE. People can make simplistic claims about religion that do real damage unless they are countered by helping children to appreciate the complexity of what is being claimed. Such views as thinking that religion is only private matter, or that religion is a thing of the past, or that it is a comfort for the deprived or not real knowledge like science, can do and are doing real harm to people's lives in some cases. You end up with people burning the Qur'an for example, or even being violent in response to misperceptions of faith or belief. But exposing these claims is helping deepen pupils' understanding in ways that may prevent making life worse than they should be for themselves and others.

I then went to the rest of the online broadcast of Gill Vaisey's session exploring the lived experience of five year old children. The pedagogical thinking behind Gill's work is really interesting. Here is where the youngest children are, perhaps for the first time, exposed to what really matters in different religions and beliefs. Gill's resources make use of real children in real families. This gets us away from idealised portraits of what religious family life is supposed to look like to something authentic and imperfect.

Gill has been careful to show diversity within traditions as well as a single family example, so children can get the idea that there's not just one way of being part of a religion or belief community. And the materials include Humanism and Bahá'í families as well as the usually recognised faiths. Here is an example of an inclusive approach to RE where no child needs to feel left out.

In the Saturday session I started with Marina Kiroudi's 'European Microcosm in Orthodox RE'. Here we learned about the huge increase in the numbers of Orthodox Christian families in Germany, now, with Ukrainians, perhaps 4m. It's a big task to find ways of bringing them together as they belong to nine different diocesan authorities. But Marina is looking at ways of building bridges between their experience and the German educational context, particularly through use of a school text book.

Vital questions of identity formation are in my view key to keeping people out of these bad lives that are based around hatreds and misunderstandings of 'us' and 'them'.

Essential here is the acquisition of language skills. Perhaps this is a subject for our next EFTRE conference: *identity formation and identity fundamentalism*.

I also managed to see the last 20 minutes of Leon Robinson's artworks appreciation session. Of particular interest to my question here was Leon's critical exploration of the affective domain, and how pupils can be brought to a deeper understanding of how best to care for each other and develop their powers of resilience.

Members of the group shared precious things to them, such as books, snowdrops, and common interests. In our group these included Caravaggio, music, types of shirt, being with a friend, and Italian coffee machines.

We were invited to reflect on the sharing process and asked 'Can this method help facilitate appreciation of diversity?'

This morning, for my first workshop, I went to Forgiveness Education with Anita Gracie and Jill Magennis. Now here was session dealing directly with my question of keeping people out of bad lives. The session drew on the work of American psychologist Prof. Robert Enright as well as their own, showing how holding onto such emotions as grief, anger and resentment does deep psychological harm, often bringing people into a downward cycle of despair and an ultimately worse life than the one they could have had.

Anita and Jill showed that forgiveness is not simple, but needs *practice* and has measurable positive effects on people's lives. A whole programme is being offered to schools in Northern Ireland as part of the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) and / or the RE curriculum for 10-11 year old children.

And I did manage to get to the 2nd half of Britta Kortholt, Eva Lindhardt and Norman Richardson's Strategies for Controversial Issues. How important is it to adopt a really good strategy for approaching controversial issues with young people? I would say absolutely vital. What do pupils think of certain events, images, statues, that are the subject of parallel narratives, for example? What about gender issues, cartoons that make fun of belief, and so on? People might say, 'We should do this', 'We must not do that...'. And this of course happens within as well as amongst religions and beliefs, as well as in society generally.

Children and young people simply MUST get active, democratic experience in dealing with different views and working towards positive outcomes. Critical thinking and empathy, bearing in mind the classroom context, are vital components of the 'community of disagreement' that Britta, Eva and Norman introduced us to, and to the classroom strategies they gave as examples.

In the final session I went first to Stefanie Sinclair and John Maiden's fascinating film-making project, 'The DocuTube method'. This involved students in eight different countries making their own short films building into the overarching project themes of tolerance and peace, and countering the idea that religion is a problem; a cause of conflict throughout history. Students are challenged to make documentaries that connect events

and times in history to their own experience and interests. Showing them how to turn the world we live in, into a better place.

Choices of films were fascinating, such as students in Skopje, North Macedonia, who made a film about their city and some of its religious diversity. Or another one made in England on Christian, Muslim and other symbols as they may relate to discrimination and Human Rights.

And finally, I managed to catch the last half hour of Bert Roebben, Barbara Niedermann and Sandra Cullen's investigations into the impact of pilgrimage on student teacher identity formation. As a lover of the BBC programmes on pilgrimage, where celebrities go to such places as Santiago de Compostela, or the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Fátima in Portugal, and learn so much about each other and each other's perspectives on life, I would love to have attended the whole session. But from what I did see it was clear that the approach of the SpiRiTEx (Sacred Spaces, Rituals and Texts in European Teacher Education) project was incredibly meaningful and, in some cases, life changing for those who participated. For example, one near-atheist student teacher who visited the Church of the Child of Prague said they felt able to participate in the hymn singing in the crypt. The approach enabled one student to step back from the speed of life and take time to appreciate special fleeting moments and remember.

I am so grateful to all of you who have contributed to this most stimulating EFTRE conference. I know the hard work that is required to engage in your projects and to make is available to present to us here. And you have done so with generosity and shared the wealth of your experience and expertise.

We are all in our ways, making a contribution to keeping people out of bad lives. We must never give up.

Thank you for inviting me to reflect on your presentations for the last five EFTRE conferences; I shall now retire from this great honour, and as the great Roman orator Cicero said, "As for you, my young friends, I urge you to strive for virtue, for without it friendship cannot exist. And friendship, aside from virtue, is the greatest thing we can find in life." And I dedicate this summary to absent friends.

Dave Francis

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