
Multi-Faith Religious Education

Chris Hess

CALLING OR COMPROMISE? is a 16-page booklet published by the Association of Christian Teachers (2 Romeland Hill, St Albans, AL3 4ET), price £1, plus 30p postage.

Amongst the problems that can face a Christian teacher of Religious Education in a state school are those of being misunderstood by fellow-believers in his own church and of being accused of compromising the gospel because he is teaching religions other than Biblical Christianity. Neither of these problems need exist, but they often do. They may well arise from different perceptions of the rôle of the RE teacher, who sees himself as a professional educator whose primary task is to teach according to the Agreed Syllabus, as determined by his employer, the Local Education Authority. Church members may well see the teacher as an evangelist who should do nothing but teach the Scriptures and explain the gospel. They cannot understand the Christian teacher who is involved with multi-faith RE.

CALLING OR COMPROMISE? has been compiled by the Religious Education Committee of the Association of Christian Teachers with the aim of helping 'those who are trying to understand the challenge of multi-faith religious education in schools.' They hope it will be read, amongst others, by church members and Christian parents who may be perplexed by multi-faith RE. They recognise that there is 'an urgent need for greater understanding of the nature of multi-faith RE, the reasons for its current use, and the problems and perplexities that it poses for Christian RE teachers'.

The question is asked at the beginning of the booklet, 'Can I teach religions other than Christianity and still retain my firm Christian commitment?' Four approaches that evangelical Christians could take to the teaching of multi-faith RE are then suggested and analysed: to teach it unreservedly and uncritically; to refuse to teach it; to teach it from a particular perspective; to teach it within certain limitations. **The main purpose of this booklet is to show that 'evangelical Christians can teach multi-faith RE and retain their commitments and their integrity'**, provided that they are strong in their own faith, recognise some potential hazards and are prepared to be discerning in their approach to teaching.

A number of reasons are then adduced as to why Christians are involved in multi-faith RE. Legally, they have no choice, since the Education Act (1988) Section 8.3 states that 'any agreed syllabus...shall reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain'. Most Christian teachers are happy with this, since the importance of teaching Christianity is given legal status for the first time, whilst due note is taken of the other major

world religions present in our society. 'Christian teachers who are secure in their faith will not be nervous about exploring ideas from a range of faiths with their pupils', state the authors.

The development of RE from 1944 to the present day is traced: the assumption of the 1944 Education Act that Religious *Instruction* (note the title) would be Christian, though not including 'any catechism or formulary which is distinctive of any particular religious denomination' (Section 26); the influence of the research of Goldman and others in the mid-1960s which led to the emphasis on 'child-centred' education, which conveniently for them tied in with liberal theology and minimised the importance of the Bible in what then became called Religious Education; the growth of the 'world religions' and phenomenological approach in the 1970s, which led to a great increase in interesting teaching materials on various world religions, but neglected Christianity; and then to the situation today, when, for example, 'teachers who are positive and observant Muslims, Sikhs or Hindus have sometimes been welcomed as valuable resources in multi-cultural education whereas **Christians with similar attitudes and commitments have been treated with suspicion and even hostility**'.

RE today is faced with a number of problems: RE teachers are divided between those who consider the personal spiritual development of the pupils to be the concern of teachers, and those who do not; there are problems caused by a lack of good teaching materials for Christianity, and the lack of money to buy such as do exist; problems caused by RE being subsumed into 'Humanities' courses, or a programme of Personal and Social Education, where the subject can soon lose its identity; and the problems caused by children and other teachers from totally secular backgrounds who find RE irrelevant and arid.

A number of the hazards of teaching multi-faith RE are then given, such as the dangers of superficiality and misrepresentation. However, **for Christian teachers one of the greatest hazards is that of misunderstanding, and when this comes from other Christians it can be hard to cope with**. 'Christian teachers who maintain both a firm and clear witness to Christ as the only Saviour, and who are also committed to the sensitive and accurate presentation of various faiths from the viewpoint of adherents, may well be misunderstood. In school they may be regarded as inconsistent or even dangerous. In church their treatment of other religions may be seen as an unacceptable compromise'.

The final part of the booklet gives four case studies from the individual experiences of teachers, which helps those outside school to understand something of the pressures, problems and tensions that Christian RE teachers can face.

It is most likely that anyone teaching RE today in a state primary or secondary school will be teaching a range of faiths. Evangelical Christian teachers are and need to be involved. They also need to be understood, supported and encouraged by their churches. They see themselves primarily not as evangelists (although many are involved in voluntary Christian activities in school), but as educators. It is the privilege and responsibility of the church to preach the gospel; of Christian parents to bring up their children 'in the nurture and admonition of the Lord' (Eph 6:4)

and of Christian RE teachers to be the best educators they can, to the glory of God, under the authority of the state, and for the benefit of the children.

This booklet raises several important issues, not all of which have answers. It makes a number of helpful points, and is useful for helping non-teaching Christians to understand what is happening in RE in schools, and for alerting them to some of the problems being faced by Christian RE teachers, many of whom would say they are called by God to this work, and who need the understanding, support and prayers of their fellow Christians in their local church. The booklet can be read with profit by pastors, parents and other interested church members as well as by the teachers themselves.

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