

Philosophy and Religious Studies ... A Report From Britain

Religious Education is a compulsory component of all school curricula in Great Britain. Local Education Authorities are legally bound to teach it. Over the last twenty years "R E or R S" (Religious Studies) in Britain has undergone many changes. R S in the 1980's is to great extent "open ended" and not necessarily doctrinal. It is also multi-cultural and the teaching of ALL major belief systems has become acceptable, reflecting the multi-racial society in which we live.

With this open-ended approach, greater emphasis is put on the philosophical and existential aspects of Religious Studies. Classes will discuss not only theological or metaphysical concepts but also personal, moral, social and contemporary issues as well. The link between philosophy and religion is obviously not a new concept, but goes back to the days of Plato and Graeco-Jewish thought.

I have taught R S for nine years in three large schools in Britain and often I have found that the unique discipline of philosophy, when applied to R S can generate stimulating and productive lessons. So what role can philosophy play in developing a Religious Studies syllabus? In order to answer this question, one must show how philosophy is related to religion and what it can contribute to R S.

Firstly, the decision to accept or reject any particular religious belief or idea is philosophical. Philosophy examines the structures of religious belief and if a child says "I don't believe in God because . . ." then he or she is straightaway stepping into the realms of philosophical inquiry.

Secondly, philosophy can help children to clarify religious language. A child might ask "how can God have the whole world in his hands?" The analysis of religious language is a very important function, as the language of religion is seldom the language of the playground.

Thirdly, by being able to reason and apply the rules of logic, a child may begin to construct for himself or herself a coherent theology (or lack of it). The sharpening of reasoning skills will enable children to perceive contradictions or inconsistencies in religious beliefs.

Fourthly, philosophy can provide an understanding of the intellectual context in which religious belief arises. It can help children appreciate the cultural and social divergencies of the world and also generate an empathy with others' belief systems.

Philosophy teaches the importance of creative and logical thinking. It enables one to give reasons for beliefs and encourages dialogue and reflection. These qualities are of paramount importance to any R S lesson whereby the processes of inquiry, exploration and discovery can be nurtured and developed. Philosophy teaches the need for openness and dialogue and this can assist children in their moral, social and religious growth.

However, as aware as I was of the inter-relationship between philosophy and religious studies, I became increasingly concerned at the lack of a framework for the nurturing of this relationship. It is all very well and good pupils

raising deep theological and philosophical questions, but if they can't be followed up, enlarged upon explored, analysed and related to, then they are like the seeds that fall on stony ground. In order for them to be nurtured and be allowed to grow and bear fruit, then the children must be allowed access to their inherent tools of critical thought. The school system encourages reasoning skills but has given little direction and guidance in procuring them. Children might ask deep philosophical and theological questions but unless they have become familiar with the methods and structures of philosophical enquiry, then the questions are continually being begged, and under-valued.

The primary task therefore, as I saw it, was to create a community of enquiry that encouraged the exploration and discovery of these ideas. Within the community, the pupils would be able to experience at first hand a framework whereby ideas and beliefs could be analysed, discussed explored and discovered. Only by practice and the development of the skills of discussion, reasoning and reflection could these ideas begin to be analysed and nurtured at their appropriate depth. Rather than R S lessons being a confusing morass of eternal questioning and forum for the "tit for tat" swapping of opinions and prejudices, they could become a real community of reason, dialogue and reflection.

The programme designed by Professor Lipman and his colleagues at the IAPC provided me with the framework that the pupils needed. Many readers will be familiar with the work of the IAPC and I will not expand on it in this article. I have used the programme for two years with twelve and thirteen year olds as part of my Religious Studies syllabus. The results, both qualitatively and quantitatively have been promising, and the pupils enjoy doing the programme. As for my own perceptions, I have far greater respect for the depths and abilities of children to think and to articulate their thoughts. My listening skills have improved - a facet of education that many teachers never contemplate at all. I found an increased empathy with children's thoughts growing in me as the community of inquiry developed. Some lessons exceeded my expectations and I genuinely felt that considerable philosophical progress had been made. The pupils found many of their own discoveries interesting and frequently I would show them a transcript from a previous lesson. The programme can cover vast philosophical ground and at times we found ourselves philosophizing about religious ideas. I conclude with an excerpt from a transcript taken from a lesson stimulated by a chapter in Harry Stotlemeier's *Discovery*.

- Lisa When my cat died I wondered whether animals have a soul?
- Katy Same here, when my hamster died . . . I wondered whether he went anywhere?
- Peter What do you mean went anywhere? Where is anywhere?
- Katy Well, I knew where his body went - we buried it under a tree . . . but I wondered whether there was more to it than that?
- Scott Whether there is a life after death?
- Katy Yes. I wondered whether somehow he was immortal.

- Lisa I think all living things have a soul. When they die part of them lives on. The soul can't be destroyed . . . the body can but the soul . . . well it just goes on!
- Peter How can you say that? When did you ever see a *soul*?
- Lisa I've never seen one, no. But apart from that my cat lives on in my memory and in your memories now!
- Gareth Wait a minute . . . 'cus you've not seen something it doesn't mean it doesn't exist.
- Peter What do you mean?
- Gareth Well there's lots of things I've not seen but I know they exist . . .
- Nick Like what?
- Gareth Love. Hate. Jealousy. My neighbour's bathroom. Millions of things.
- Nick That's different.
- Gareth Why?
- Nick You can see love and all that . . . we know that exists. As for your neighbour's bathroom, if he lives in a house like yours he's bound to have a bathroom.
- Katy O.K. So there's lots of things that we can't see that we know exists . . . so why not the soul?
- Peter Well look at me. (laughter) You can see my body. You can see my brain if you cut me up, and if you see my brain, you know I must have a mind. But the soul . . . its just been made up by people who've lost cats or hamsters and things. (laughter)
- Teacher So you say that you can see the mind Peter?
- Peter No, but you know its there . . . its bound to be . . . like the neighbour's bathroom.
- Gareth The mind is different from the body. You can't have one without the other. If your body dies your mind does too!
- Nick What about the soul then? If the body dies does the soul live on? And the mind. If that dies does the soul live on?
- Lisa Why not?
- Nick 'Cus you don't know its there. You have no proof.
- Lisa What sort of proof do you want? I'm glad we haven't got any - if we knew we had a soul and we lived after death we wouldn't be afraid to die and life would be stupid - people would walk in front of buses, and things.
- Simon But who is to say that even if we have a soul it means we live on forever. It doesn't follow.
(Lesson continues)

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