

## GATEWAY DOCUMENT 1.2

### Key terms

#### WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

Words can be confusing. In particular, labels can distort, prejudice and misinform. So forming clear ideas about the meaning of words is essential for good communication and education. There are some important key words when looking at religious and philosophical approaches to contentious issues, for example, 'fundamentalist', 'conservative' and 'liberal'. Some of the terms occur frequently in connection with issues addressed by *REsilience* and it is therefore important for students to be aware of them.

#### KEY QUESTIONS

##### How can this help teachers and students to increase their understanding of contentious issues?

Clarifying the meaning of key words in the context of any particular discussion will help to inform accurate and constructive discussion. This is an essential starting point even though it may sometimes challenge the views and understanding of the teacher as well as those of the students.

##### Why is this a contentious topic?

Some believers see their own preferred interpretation of doctrines as the only valid ones. They may be very antagonistic towards the truth claims of others. In addition, some words and labels are used to dismiss ideas or groups of people without careful discussion or thought. In this way they become slogans to use as weapons against people, not descriptions to discuss with them.

##### Why is RE relevant to this topic?

It is important for teachers to be able to help students understand the diversity of ways people interpret religious beliefs and traditions. It is also vital that students learn to use key words carefully and become confident enough to ask for clarification. This aids understanding and lessens confusion.

All the terms listed above in the section 'Why is this relevant for *REsilience*?' are used at times to refer to different ways of interpreting a tradition. Some of the terms may be more familiar in an economic or political context but are also applied to religion. In religion these

terms often describe different responses to the questions that have arisen when religious traditions meet new issues or problems thrown up by aspects of modern life. In some European countries many religious divisions within both Judaism and Christianity have their beginnings in the 18th century when new social situations arose and some scholars started to try to interpret what was written in scripture in the light of contemporary ideas. Theologians faced challenges from science, the nature of industrialised society, social change and much wider access to education.

In a political context the issue is similar. Descriptive terms reflect how someone views his or her own history and tradition. For example, someone who sees her or his history from a conservative standpoint often values the stability of the past and wants to hold onto the values that they believe have stood the test of time. Someone with a liberal standpoint may be more inclined to see change in a positive light and not to be so concerned about holding fast to tradition (although liberals may also be attached to fundamental values that have stood the test of time e.g. liberty).

### What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

- Some of the terms are used to describe others in a negative way. 'Extremist', for example, is a label rarely applied by people to themselves. It is a word for expressing the view that whilst most people have moderate and generally acceptable beliefs and opinions, a few have unacceptable beliefs and opinions and these people are labelled 'extremist'. It is a word often used to divide people into 'us' and 'them'. The challenge here is to get students to understand both the meaning and nuances of the specialist vocabulary they learn and to then use it itself in a discerning way rather than simply as verbal badges for themselves and others
- 'Absolutism' and 'relativism' similarly divide people into two opposing groups. Someone with absolutist beliefs would believe that these are true for all time and in all places. An absolutist will often have a clear understanding that something is either right or wrong and that there are no shades of grey involved. For a relativist, a right decision will be much more dependent on the circumstances because of their understanding of the relative priority of experience, reason and belief. For most people, moral dilemmas involve many shades of grey. In this view, the teachings of Jesus, for instance, reflect life in first century Palestine and so need to be interpreted in the context of twenty-first century Britain. The challenge for teachers is to try to get students with views at either end of this spectrum at least to consider the notion that it is important and useful to understand how some other people see the world and to acknowledge their right to their position.
- 'Conservative' and 'liberal' apply in religious, philosophical and economic and political contexts. Liberal is a particularly difficult word as is pointed to by these words of political philosopher Kwame Appiah who has written, "...*the liberal tradition...is not so much a body of doctrine as a set of debates...liberalism, taken in this loose and baggy sense, encompass[es] nearly all members of nearly all of the mainstream political parties in Europe and North America; it also encompasses theorists who...regard themselves as*

*hostile to the liberal tradition rather than part of it.”* (Appiah, Kwame Anthony; *The Ethics of Identity*; Princeton University Press; 2005)

- A ‘fundamentalist’ might be described as a person with absolutist religious views and a tendency to interpret religious teachings very literally, with little or no room allowed for experience to shape the way they understand the teachings. Their views may well be seen by more liberal interpreters as extreme.

### **How can teachers address such challenges?**

- Through careful explanation and accurate, thoughtful use of terms. Sometimes discussing/researching key terms can be the point of a lesson, as this will help students to be discerning in their use of language. Such activity can also model ways of using information/facts and help students to acquire the vocabulary needed for compromise and principled disagreement.
- Through philosophical or conceptual enquiry.

## **NEXT STEPS**

### **Signposts for further reading**

Ford, David (1999) *Theology. A very short introduction*, OUP (especially Chapter 2)

Jones, G., Hayward, J., and Cardinal, D. (2008) *Epistemology: the theory of knowledge*, Hodder

Ruthven, Malise (2007) *Fundamentalism: a very short introduction*, OUP

### **Signposts for further resources**

Baggini, Julian (2006) *Do You Think What You Think You Think?* Plume

Hunt, Dilwyn (2007) *Introducing Religious Ethics*, Nelson Thorne

Cardinal, D., Jones, G. and Hayward, J (2008) *An Introduction to Philosophy for AS level*, Hodder

### **Signposts for further action**

Look at Gateway 3.1 on effective strategies

Read and discuss *Everyone Matters in the Classroom. A Practice Code for Teachers of RE* <http://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org/content/blogcategory/50/80/> to reinforce staff understanding of how to achieve impartial approaches to religious diversity in a classroom context.

## APPENDIX

### Some working definitions of terms used in religious and/or political discourse

**Conservative:** characterised by an emphasis on orthodoxy in terms of doctrine: uncomfortable with individualism in belief: often a serious commitment to the cause along with traditionalist views on social and personal issues.

**Extremist:** (see also Gateway 4:1): a term normally used by some people about others and not often used as a self descriptor: generally used to contrast those of whom it is used with a position perceived as more mainstream or moderate.

**Fascist:** The word 'Fascism' comes from the Italian language and was first used of the government of Benito Mussolini in Italy from 1922 to 1934. Later the Nazis in Germany and the government of General Franco in Spain were referred to as fascist because they shared with Mussolini ideas about the supremacy of a particular national or ethnic group, and the importance of strong and authoritarian government led by a charismatic leader. In Britain there were small fascist groups from the early 1920s that believed that Britain would be a better country if it followed the examples of Italy or Nazi Germany. The most famous and successful of these fascist groups was the British Union of Fascists formed by Sir Oswald Mosley in the 1930s. Since the Second World War there has been a succession of small fascist groups of which the most well known have been the National Front and the British National Party. Typically these parties see themselves standing up for English or British tradition, which they define narrowly and in ways that discount the contributions to Britain made by recent generations of immigrants. Typically British Fascists have called for an end to large-scale immigration and active repatriation of immigrants and the families of immigrants particularly where these people are non-white.

**Fundamentalist:** In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century a group of religiously conservative Protestant Christians in the USA asserted that there were non-negotiable fundamental truths to Christianity, such as the Bible having been divinely revealed by God and therefore infallibly and literally correct in all things. These Christians were happy to be called Fundamentalists. In more recent years the term has come to be applied, almost always pejoratively, to people of any religion who have unwavering faith in the literal truth of the basic teachings of their religion, and thereby hold people who do not share their beliefs to be in error. It is rarely a helpful word, often being a way to dismiss someone's religious beliefs and thereby bypass any need to come to understand those beliefs or seek to engage in dialogue.

**Islamist/Islamism:** As would be expected these words are related to Islam but refer to political movements and individuals within Islam. Essentially 'Islamism' is about a system of government that is thoroughly based on Islamic principles and Islamists are supporters of such a system of government. The longer-term goal of many Islamists is that Islamic governments in individual countries will come together to form a single Islamic entity that in time might cover the whole world. Islamism is certainly not a united movement; there are different Islamist groups, and individuals with Islamist ideals. There is nothing wrong with

individual Muslims subscribing to the ideal of an Islamic state, but some forms of Islamism advocate the use of violence to achieve their ends and as such represent a threat to peace and public order. (For more about Islamism see Gateway Document 4.10.)

**Liberal:** Originally an economic and political term for those who believed in free trade and in the right of individuals to make basic decisions about how they should live their lives. The term is used in relation to religion to describe those who believe in a significant role for individual reasoning and taking account of experience in interpreting the meaning and implication of religious beliefs, and a wariness of too great a weight being given to tradition and authority in matters of doctrine and morals.

**Radical:** This word can be used of an individual or a group of people. It might refer to a political party, a movement in art, literature, music or cinema, or religion. Essentially the word 'radical' describes people who want to overturn a current way of doing something and to do it in a completely different way. There is nothing intrinsically good or bad about the word. It can describe inspired reformers and visionaries who have brought about great benefit to humankind. But it can also refer to those who believe that the change they want should be brought about by illegal means, even violent means.

**Secular:** 'secular' is usually taken to mean the opposite of 'religious'. When a country is called 'secular' this can mean that the government is not connected with any religious group even though many of the people are very religious; but 'secular' can also refer to a country where only a minority of the population are religious and where religion has little importance in the mainstream of social or intellectual life.