



GATEWAY DOCUMENT 4.8

Understanding social, cultural and political aspects of religion

WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

One aspect of religious diversity is the way interpretations of doctrines relating to beliefs and practices can be influenced by social, cultural and political factors. The cultural expression of a religion can have as much significance to an adherent as any universal teachings detached from a cultural context. This is not always easy to understand in the Protestant Christian-influenced culture of the UK, where belief is prioritised over practice and where it is relatively common to make a separation between religion on the one hand and non-religious belief and culture on the other. But in many other contexts this separation simply makes no sense; for example, Hinduism is embedded in Indian culture and the two are so closely intertwined that it is sometimes (though not always) difficult to separate religious and cultural elements. As far as political aspects are concerned, a religion may be experienced very differently in a situation where its adherents are in a minority (e.g. Tamil Hindus in Sri Lanka) from where they are the majority and the ones who wield considerable political power (e.g. Hindus in India).

Another relevant issue is the social, cultural and political context for religion. In the last 150 years, in Britain and beyond, the context includes both the emergence of a more secular society and religious reactions to this.

KEY QUESTIONS

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

- It can help them to see that the way religious teachings are interpreted by groups and individuals may be influenced by the context in which people live. For example, a Hindu boy growing up in a small town in Devon may have a different understanding of the nature and purpose of his life than he would in the cultural context of a village or a city in India, a major port in Malaysia, a small Indian community in Tanzania or in one of a handful of Hindu families in a north European city. He may be living in a situation where

his own and his family's beliefs and practices are the norm or are unusual. Going beyond the geographical context, he may be from a family at any point on the spectrum from wealthy to financially struggling, or that from highly educated to barely literate.

- Cultural factors may include broad expectations about family life, patterns and relationships, language, food and social attitudes. In some cases people may share many of these expectations across a region irrespective of religion or belief. This sense of shared attitudes or ways of living may outweigh a sense of being different on grounds of religion or belief e.g. Christians and Muslims in Syria.
- Political aspects of religion most often come into play when two or more groups in an area identify themselves primarily by religion. For instance, in the case of the conflict in Bosnia, whether one is a Serb (eastern Orthodox Christian) or a Croat (Roman Catholic Christian) or a Bosnian Muslim has been an identification of community membership as much as religious belief. In some situations people may choose a primarily religious identification and rally round a political party or grouping on that basis, sometimes in combination with other ideological stances (e.g. the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India). In other examples, religion may be a primary source of identity and become politicized in a struggle for national freedom (e.g. the symbolic significance of Buddhism and the Dalai Lama for Tibetan nationalists).
- Another political aspect of religion is that of people using religious affiliations and networks to lobby politicians to support or reject changes in the law on issues about which they feel strongly. For example, some Christian organisations campaign in opposition to genetically modified crops, others campaign in favour of them, both on religious grounds.

Why is this a contentious topic?

There may be contention where people claim religious authority for something that others would attribute to culture. For example, there have been cases in Britain of parents from Muslim or Sikh backgrounds who have wished to impose their choice of marriage partner on their son or daughter and have claimed that they have a religious right to do so. In such cases, the claim of religious authority often has greater weight for those who wish to invoke it than a justification on grounds of cultural practice would have.

Religion may be used to back one side or another in a conflict when the issue is not primarily a religious but a social or cultural or political one. However, the distinction between religious, social and political issues is not easily drawn for many religious people, for whom political views and social behaviour are heavily influenced by their religious beliefs.

Why is RE relevant to this topic?

If students track news stories in the media, they are likely to be confronted with a large number of reports which are presented as being about religion even if there is only a peripheral connection. These often cast religion in a negative light, sometimes unfairly,

and may contribute to stereotyping and prejudice. The key point here is for teachers to help students notice whether religious and non-religious beliefs are being represented fairly.

For example, the use of a face veil or 'niqab' by a small number of Muslim women has become an issue in some European countries. The wearing of head covering by Muslim women is a good example of a practice that is for some cultural, for others a religious requirement, and for yet others the distinction between culture and religion makes no sense. The most frequent form of head covering used by Muslim women in Malaysia is a coloured headscarf or small turban, in contrast to the black veil that covers the head but not the face and is more commonly seen in some Gulf states. Interpretations of modest dress vary across the Islamic world. However, sometimes head coverings are used as a political identifier; some women who wear a niqab (face veil) do so as a political act to assert their right, as Muslim women, to dress as they choose, not as they are expected to by a non-Muslim social majority. By contrast, for some these choices about headwear are seen as signifiers of the position of women more broadly and are viewed as emblems of oppression.

Another example of cultural difference regarding religion relates to attitudes towards significant people. In some parts of the world, many would accept as perfectly legitimate the idea that people in authority and even major religious figures can be the subject of less than respectful treatment in art and literature. For other people from cultures where there is a greater sense of respect for people in authority, including the older members of any family, there is much less tolerance of what may be seen as attacks on something or someone precious. Examples might include the anger provoked by Danish cartoons that depicted the Prophet Muhammad in a disrespectful light, the opposition of Hindu organisations to the use of Hindu sacred symbols on shoes or the opposition of Christians to offensive use of central Christian images. The principle at stake is how far the exercise of free speech should be modified to take account of religious sensitivities.

What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

- Students may react in a negative or judgemental way towards an entire religious tradition on the basis of a particular cultural practice that is not an essential requirement of the religion.
- Students may view a conflict or a contentious issue as being essentially about differences of religion or belief when it is more to do with social, political or economic factors.
- Some students may make no separation between their own religion or belief and the culture in which it is expressed, and may find it difficult to accept others looking at an issue in this way.
- Students may hold the view that particular religious beliefs or practices are objectionable even when other factors have been properly taken into account.

How can teachers address such challenges?

- The RE curriculum will be more relevant and engaging to students and help to prepare them for life beyond school if it includes study of social, cultural and political aspects of religion, particularly those that are topical.
- Resources need to reflect the diversity of religions and beliefs in both text and visual material, avoiding stereotypes such as an over-emphasis on pictures of Hassidic Jews or Muslim women with covered faces or sadhus in loincloths to illustrate Hinduism. Such people are of course adherents of the religious traditions involved but they may not be typical or representative and a balanced picture will include examples of people dressed in a variety of ways including traditional and modern, in the context of a range of the parts of the world where a particular tradition is to be found.
- Students need to learn about differences across religious traditions including cultural diversity. For example, whilst core beliefs may be shared, interpretation and religious practice may vary according to social and cultural context and also individual preference and experience.
- Teaching about beliefs needs to focus on people as well as systems, so that the perspectives of individual human beings can come across. In considering contentious issues, students need to be helped to understand that in issues of interpretation there may be many intermediate points on a continuum, not just the extremes.
- Teaching about the principles of tolerance and compassion, and discussion about how they may be put into practice, raises interesting questions. How desirable is freedom of expression if it insults or offends others? Is religious prejudice or insensitivity as bad as racial hatred? Does current legislation go far enough or too far? (see Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006)

NEXT STEPS

Signposts for further reading

Nesbitt, E (2004) *Intercultural Education: Ethnographic and religious approaches*, Sussex Academic Press. This book chronicles insights from Nesbitt's research with a particular but not exclusive focus on young people from Hindu and Sikh backgrounds and illustrates the diversity of belief and practice and some of the social and cultural factors involved. It includes a helpful appendix: *Practical guidelines for teachers: cultural diversity and the school*.

Woodhead, L. (ed.) (2002) *Religions in the modern world: Traditions and transformations* Routledge (especially Part II Themes and trends).

Signposts for further resources

www.bbc.co.uk/religion See 'Religion in the news' section for examples across the world of the interplay of religion and politics

Jackson, R. (ed.) (2010) *Materials used to teach about world religions in schools in England*. Research Report DCSF-RR197 available at www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-RB197

Signposts for further action

See also Gateway 2.2 on displaying sensitivity to home backgrounds of pupils.

Review with colleagues who teach citizenship education the potential opportunities for shared work on social, cultural and political aspects of religion.