

Book reviews

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Display for Learning

(2009) Andrew-Power, K. and Gormley, Continuum Intl.

Gateway: [2.3](#), [2.5](#)

Andrew-Power and Gormley's starting point is the potential that the school environment has to communicate powerful messages. Their eminently practical approaches to creating effective display for learning, whilst utilising the whole environment to support schools' core beliefs and values, is clear and concise. The layout is user-friendly, although the black and white illustrations have limited impact.

This book prompts teachers to consider the educational rationale of display and the messages communicated through image and word. This recognition of the power of visual images and language to generate interest and stimulate thought is relevant to teachers trying to engage students of all abilities and learning styles in learning about contentious issues. Topics like the use of signage and positive language to reinforce courtesy and respect have a wider relevance to the whole school climate within which contentious issues are considered.

This resource, referenced in Gateways 2.3 and 2.5, does not specifically address display in learning and teaching about contentious issues. However, sections such as that on 'alternatives to hands up' and 'selecting students' inform the teaching of sensitive issues and ways of engaging students in the discourse. Its common-sense approach and information will encourage teachers in using this 'tool to enhance learning, complement excellent teaching and increase engagement', in contentious issues in the classroom and beyond, giving confidence to those daunted by the thought of designing and planning displays.

Do You Think What You Think You Think?

(2006) by Julian Baggini and Jeremy Stangroom, Plume

Gateway: [1.2](#)

I selected this resource since I have used it myself to improve my teaching of philosophical issues and therefore feel able to comment in some depth on its use. It is subtitled 'The Ultimate Philosophical Quiz Book' and contains a selection of games which enable exploration of philosophical issues and thinking skills. Most of them are paper adaptations of ones found on the [Philosophers Magazine](#) website, unsurprisingly, since this is also written by the book's editors. In any event the website is useful for schools equipped with sufficient PCs and has the advantage of being periodically updated with new games. Speaking personally though I have found the book to be the more useful teaching tool; in order to use the games meaningfully with students you need to have an overview of all stages of the game and with some it is useful to be aware of all the possible outcomes which the website doesn't really enable you to do.

The games offered in the book cover logical thinking, and key philosophical concepts such as God, morality, art, taboos, freedom and the self and life after death. They will enable teachers to engage students in philosophical skills as an introduction and then to unpack the skills later on with a view to applying them to other issues. I have used the 'Philosophical Health Check' for example as an introduction to Critical Thinking, by giving the quiz to students and then allowing them to select several of the 'tensions' they found in their own thinking to debate with partners.

This book could provide teachers with useful material relevant to any of the Gateways in section 1 and should also enable non-specialist teachers to feel more comfortable with developing philosophy skills. I would encourage any RE teacher teaching thematic RS, Philosophy or Critical Thinking to invest in this book and/or to visit the website.

How Are We to Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest

(1993) Peter Singer, OUP

Gateway: [3.1](#)

This book is not one specifically concerned with how to deal with the contentious issues raised by REsilience, but rather it is one to stimulate an interest in Ethics and Moral Philosophy and which may support further study and encourage exploration and discovery.

Peter Singer is an engaging contemporary Utilitarian ethicist, who may already be familiar to teachers of A-Level Ethics and Philosophy, or those who have studied ethics at university. He is best known for his writings on medical ethics, animal rights and environmental issues. He is very good at making difficult ethical ideas accessible to the general reader. He does not write from a religious perspective but includes religious ideas and thinking in his coverage.

There are eleven fairly self-contained chapters, with detailed notes and references to further reading at the end. These chapters cover ethical topics such as selfishness, the good life and living with purpose. Singer quotes examples from Christian ethics, world faiths, Greek ethics and some of the great 19th and 20th century philosophers. He also pays attention to gender and ethics. Some of the examples used are now rather dated, but this is a stimulating read nonetheless. It is perhaps best suited to someone who already has a basic understanding of ethical issues and arguments, or who wants to refresh pre-existing knowledge. If time is short, Chapter 8 on Living Ethically, and Chapter 9 on The Nature of Ethics can be recommended.

Intercultural Education. Ethnographic and Religious Approaches

(2004) Eleanor Nesbitt, Sussex Academic Press

Gateway [4.8](#)

Eleanor Nesbitt puts strong emphasis on diversity and the lived reality of religion, which she feels should figure in RE lessons alongside the presentation of orthodox religious ideals and norms. Much of her research, exemplified in this book, has been on young people from South Asian Hindu and Sikh backgrounds, but there is also an interesting chapter exploring the diversity of experience within a faith tradition, based on eight to thirteen-year-old Christian children in Coventry. Nesbitt highlights the fact that differences between religious traditions sometimes eclipse differences within faiths, rooted in cultural and ethnic factors as well as theological ones.

Another theme is the role school RE may play in providing some of young people's knowledge about their own religious traditions. Sometimes the British cultural context, especially school, can be said to influence young people's experience of their tradition. Nesbitt gives the example of young Sikhs who learned about caste in school RE, where it was sometimes presented as being in conflict with the egalitarian emphasis of Sikh institutions such as langar. Another chapter of the book, focussing on identity, includes a review of recent research supporting the proposition that young people from British, Asian and Hindu, Sikh or Muslim backgrounds are 'skilled cultural navigators' and may develop 'integrated plural identities'.

The useful appendix - 'Practical guidelines for teachers – cultural diversity and the school' - starts with overarching principles, then looks at contexts where sensitivity and awareness may be needed (e.g. naming systems, diet, dress, curriculum, body language, politics and fundraising). Many would be well known to teachers of RE but not necessarily to their colleagues.

It is an immensely enriching book and would make a very positive contribution to a reader's understanding of social and cultural aspects of religion.

Ireland, a History

(2003 new edition) Kee, Robert, Abacus

Gateway: [4.3b](#)

For those who were brought up in the latter decades of the twentieth century, brutal images of rioting, shooting and the aftermath of bomb attacks will forever be associated with news reports about Ireland. At the height of the Troubles, these reports were so familiar and so frequent, that it was all too easy to assume a reasonably sound working knowledge of such events, including their causes and their aftermath. This book is a timely reminder that the intricate complexity of Irish history should never be underestimated, not the repercussions of this for both the present and the future.

Robert Kee is an authoritative and conscientious guide through many past centuries of conflict and turmoil and eventually to the Ireland of today. He presents his material concisely, but always with appropriate academic rigour and writes in a vivid and engaging style. Well-chosen illustrations give added impact and interest to his text.

Those teachers who turn to this book out of a sense of duty will be rewarded with a fascinating read which, within just a few hundred pages, will give them a more nuanced and sensitive understanding of Ireland, its history and its politics and how its past continues to have an impact on it today.

Jihad in Islamic history. Doctrines and practice

Michael Bonner, 2008, Princeton University Press

Gateway: [4.5](#)

A scholarly but accessible book – at 175 pages long it's not a daunting read. It looks at references to jihad in the Qur'an itself and the themes linked with it in this context of struggle and effort: of the Arab words deriving from the root jhd, struggle or striving, occur 41 times in the Qur'an and only ten of them relate unambiguously to combat or war. In the Qur'an jihad is associated with gift and reciprocity, as well as fighting and recompense. Bonner then traces how fuller doctrines of jihad were developed in the post-Qur'anic literature of sira (narrative of the life of the Prophet) and maghazi (accounts of early battles during the early history of Islam) and the wars during the years of conquest and expansion of the Islamic Empire. He explores the themes of martyrdom and encounter with the 'other', before going on to jihad in the modern world and the extent of continuity with earlier history and doctrines. He provides a helpful discussion of sira and maghazi literature and hadith, both in terms of the nature of the source material and the content on the history of Muslim understanding of jihad which developed from the Medinan period of the Prophet Muhammad's life, through the later conquests of the 7th – 9th centuries, and the doctrines about the conduct of war etc in relation to jihad.

The strongest point of the book is the way Bonner traces the development of the doctrine and gives an overview of relevant aspects of Islamic history. It may be a bit on the weighty side, but it would help give confidence that you had an understanding of how this concept had developed in its historical context and why it has so much resonance for many Muslims today, as both an inner struggle and a fight to defend Islam. Good in terms of giving a historical overview but it's not light bedtime reading.

On the Road to Kandahar

(2006) Jason Burke, Penguin

Gateway [4.2](#)

The book's subtitle is 'Travels through conflict in the Islamic world'. It is based on the experiences and insights of Jason Burke during fifteen years' work as a journalist in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Palestine and Israel, Algeria, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Jordan, Qatar and India. It is a gripping and humane eye-witness account of Burke's encounters with and reflections on some major conflicts of the last two decades.

Burke's broad experience of the cultural, linguistic, religious, political and social variety of the Islamic world lends substance to his emphasis on its diversity and individuality rather than its unity and uniformity. The standard journalistic technique of finding individuals to interview gives him the personal stories behind the newspaper headlines - the impact of ideologies and policies on a football loving teenager, a doctor in a resource-starved hospital, a taxi driver with a big family, a despairing grandmother in exile, a conscripted soldier, or any other ordinary member of whichever society he was writing about. The unusual thing about his writing is his ability to analyse the 'big picture' that lies behind the personal detail, and to trace and question relationships between religion and politics, history and economics – every story about an individual is a cameo in the broader depiction of greater forces at work.

As Burke freely admits, he started off as a reporter with embarrassingly little awareness about Islam but takes the reader with him as he grows in understanding and empathy through the experiences he recounts. The book provides an authoritative but compelling account of the 'western foreign policy issues' which are part of the context for recent terrorism linked to Islam. Strongly recommended for anyone who would appreciate greater background knowledge of these issues in an accessible form.

Terror in the Mind of God

Mark Juergensmeyer (2001) University of California Press

Gateway: [4.2](#)

A readable overview of contexts and cases where members of Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist groups have engaged in terrorist violence and used religious justifications for doing so. The first half of the book explores these 'cultures of violence'. The second half looks at the elements of violent extremism shared by the above groups. Juergensmeyer identifies 'performance violence' in which acts of terrorism have symbolic value and power over and above the carnage or destruction they cause (making a link with the fact that religion lends itself particularly well to this, given its frequently symbolic forms of expression); a propensity to see the world in terms of 'cosmic war' between good and evil, a 'them' and 'us' view of the world; martyrs and demons – the satanization of the enemy; warrior power – the empowering of marginal men – and finally 'the mind of God' which he interprets as an attempt to empower religion by those who feel it has been side-lined in the post-Enlightenment world.

At the end of the book, Juergensmeyer speculates that 'in a curious way, then, the cure for religious violence may ultimately lie in a renewed appreciation for religion itself' (p249) when there is some accommodation between religion and secular life. He goes on to suggest that 'religion gives spirit to public life and provides a beacon for moral order. At the same time, it needs the temper of rationality and fair play that Enlightenment values give to civil society'.

A certain amount to disagree with; slightly dated as far as world events are concerned (e.g. on what happened to Hamas in Gaza elections) but the author gives a dispassionate account of the phenomenon of religious terrorism across a broad spectrum of traditions. An extremely interesting read, and most relevant to the gateway on this topic.

Terrorism: A Very Short Introduction

(2002) Charles Townshend OUP

Gateway [4.2](#)

The Very Short Introduction series of books produced by OUP are written to give a concise academic overview of the subject in question.

The books themselves - slim volumes, well designed and typeset, smaller than a normal paperback are ideal companions for journeys.

'Terrorism' is divided into six chapters:

- 1. The Trouble with Terrorism*
- 2. State and Terror*
- 3. Revolutionary Terrorism*
- 4. Nationalism and Terror*
- 5. Religion and Terror*
- 6. Counter-terrorism and Democracy*

The subject matter of this book is such that it could not be regarded as a 'light read' and endeavours to navigate through a variety of definitions of terrorism and its purposes. It asks questions about what makes terrorism different from other forms of political or military action, its effectiveness and considers what can be done to counter it.

The book examines whether terrorists are criminals, whether terrorism is a type of warfare, how large a threat terrorism is and how this threat is fuelled by the media.

There is an examination of the historical and ideological roots of terrorism, political and religious motivations and it gives examples of terrorist attacks and counter strategies, ranging from occurrences in the 18th and 19th centuries, to more recent events, including for example Irgun Zvai Leumi, IRA, Baader-Meinhoff, ETA, Hezbollah, Al-Qaeda and many more.

'Terrorism' is peppered with a number of photographs and quotations which in themselves are thought provoking. At the back there is a good reference section and for each chapter, a useful list of further reading.

This book provides a clear overview of a complex subject area and would be a good starting point from which one could explore the idea of 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter'.

The Challenge of Teaching Controversial Issues

(2007) Claire Holden, Trentham Books

Gateway: [1.1](#)

Review 1

This is a scholarly book divided into three main sections. Part 1 is two chapters on overview and policy issues, part 2 is eight chapters on teaching controversial issues through the curriculum and part 3 is five chapters on whole school values and action. Each chapter is written by different authors from various countries, giving it an international flavour, yet relevant for the UK; it spans pre-school through to higher education settings. There is a comprehensive reference list at the end of each chapter.

Although principally directed toward citizenship education and social studies, there are many examples that are relevant for R.E. teachers, with useful guides and examples of practical strategies for delivering lessons on controversial issues, highlighting the necessity of approaching such topics effectively.

I found the book informative and thought provoking, and it could be dipped into, rather than read in its entirety, as each chapter stands alone. Particularly useful were the chapters 'Should the hijab be allowed in school?' by Anne Sliwka, describing her work, using the 'deliberation fora' method, in Germany. I also would recommend the chapter by Varma-Joshi on racism in mainly white classrooms in Canada, and the study undertaken in Pakistan on 'Key strategies for teachers new to controversial issues.'

I don't think this book is essential reading for mentors, but it does contain some interesting background material and examples of good practice.

Review 2

The aim of the book is to 'support teachers to feel confident with dealing with controversial issues, to understand the nature of controversy and also the value of teaching about such issues' (p.2). The fifteen chapters are arranged in three distinct sections:

Section One predominantly focuses upon the principles and practices of teaching controversial issues and the discourse between educational policy and social justice. Both chapters show the relevance (and indeed imperative) of teaching controversial issues in the classroom.

Section Two consists of a range of different issues which could be raised throughout the curriculum. Many of the chapter titles reflect the questions that naturally occur in the classroom e.g. Should the Hijab be allowed in school? How should we deal with climate change?

Section Three takes a broader look at whole-school action and values. It concludes with a valuable chapter exploring key strategies for teachers new to controversial issues.

A very accessible and comprehensive book with chapters covering a range of local, national and global controversial issues. A particular strength of the book is the constant reference to teaching strategies. Although these would need to be adapted to suit the context of the particular class, they would certainly support teachers planning.

Theology: A Very Short Introduction

(1999) David Ford, Oxford University Press

Gateway: [1.2](#)

This book forms part of the Oxford University Press series of 'very short introductions' and while the book is relatively 'short' at 170 pages, it is a very wordy tome with a noticeably small font and only the occasional, black and white photograph to alleviate the tightly-packed text.

Having said that, the style is very readable and allows fairly easy access to what are, after all, very complex ideas. However, it is unlikely to be appealing or appropriate for secondary-aged pupils and is probably more useful as background reading for teachers or mentors, especially with regard to those Gateways most directly concerned with the key questions about the nature of belief (1.4/1.5/1.6); varying responses to ethical issues among different traditions and cultures (1.7); the theological background to current ideologies (4.1/4.2); and the search for shared values (1.8). The book and, in particular Chapter 2 (see below) are signposted in Gateway 1.2.

The author suggests that the book is suitable for believers and non-believers alike, the reader should be aware that it draws mainly on the Christian tradition when it comes to considering the history of theology and providing examples of theological standpoints or debates. Chapter 2 is particularly useful since it describes the relationship between theology and Religious Studies and outlines the purpose and responsibilities of theology as well as providing some clear explanations of 'types' of theological approach. The chapters covering Evil and Salvation contain much useful material while Chapter 6 – which reviews the historical and religious significance of the person Jesus Christ – will be of interest to Christians and non-Christians alike. Other topics covered include religion as a source of conflict; developments in the understanding of the nature of God; the fundamental place of belief in human existence; and the relevance of theology and belief in the third millennium.

Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think

(2007) John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, Gallup

Gateway [4.7](#)

'Who speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think' is an easy to read and thought-provoking book that outlines the findings and research of more than 50,000 interviews representing 1.3 billion Muslims who reside in more than 35 nations that are predominantly Muslim or have significant Muslim populations. The book includes the responses of Muslims to key pertinent questions ranging from their views on democracy, the role of women and their responses to 9/11.

Chapter 1: Who are Muslims? - explains the vast diversity of the global Muslim population with reference to the 1.3 billion Muslims who live in 57 different countries. Reference is made to the variety of cultural, political and economic differences experienced. Explanation is provided of some of the key beliefs and concepts of Islam (e.g. jihad) and on the variety of answers provided by Muslims when asked to define these concepts.

Chapter 2: Democracy or Theocracy – states the views of the Muslims questioned on issues relating to democracy and religious principles. The importance of the sharia as a source of legislation for Muslims is emphasised. Reference is also made to the anti-Americanism in the Muslim view, especially in relation to the views of Muslims regarding America and promoting democracy.

Chapter 3: What Makes a Radical? - discusses the views of Muslims to the acts of 9/11 and their views on extremism and terrorism.

Chapter 4: What do women want? - presents the views on those questioned on Muslim women and what they say about their rights, Islam and the West. The Western concerns about Muslim women are explored.

Chapter 5: Clash or Coexistence – considers the relations between Muslims and the West, and in particular the USA.

This book will certainly be beneficial for anyone who is interested in gaining a balanced and better understanding of the views of Muslims. The information and main discussions are presented clearly with interesting anecdotes provided. The main thoughts and questions are highlighted on each page with key points presented at the end of most chapters. This will be a useful book for teachers when reflecting on the Muslim view of a number of contentious issues, in particular the discussion on jihad, the role of women and around issues of identity, tradition and belonging.