

So, what do the Toledo Guiding Principles have to do with me?

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In this article, Joyce Miller gives the background to and content of the ‘Toledo Guiding Principles on teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools’ and asks what we can learn from them and what challenges they raise for us.

Introduction

It is just possible that busy RE teachers have not yet found the time to read the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*. After all, Britain is a world leader in religious education in public schools and it could be thought that this document will have little to offer us. Of course, this article is about to argue that this is not so.

Toledo, like Cordoba, is one of those Spanish place names that is dear to the heart of those who are working to promote inter-religious dialogue and understanding. Like many of you, I have visited Toledo and loved the place. There is evidence there of Jews, Christians and Muslims living alongside each other in a society where respect for difference and ‘positive pluralism’ appear to have been the norm. The information on the cover of the Toledo Guiding Principles (TGPs) book tells us that not only can the famous San Roman church in Toledo trace its origins back to both Christianity and Islam but also beyond this to the Visigoths and their roots in Romania and Scandinavia. This church is thus a pan-European symbol which speaks of ‘the confluence rather than the clash of civilisations’.

Nonetheless, not all has been sweetness and light in Toledo for, as we know, periods of toleration and mutual respect gave way to intolerance and persecution, acting as a reminder that what we would call community cohesion can be quickly overthrown by powerful political forces. There is a message here about not being complacent, particularly in our current political-social climate, because the history of Toledo also teaches that fear can distort mutual respect and interdependence.

The TGPs are different from most of the documents we read in our professional lives because they are the product of a ‘panel of experts’ including lawyers, educationists, academics (including Professor Robert Jackson of Warwick University) and religious leaders. The principles are published by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). This may sound like European bureaucracy but it is a very strong reminder that security is to be found through promoting human rights and democracy and that educating our young people in these principles is both important and urgent. The principles that are offered here are of relevance to all the 56 member states and it is pleasing to think that we are part of a European-wide debate on and promotion of mutual respect through teaching about religions and beliefs.

Two further introductory points remain to be made. First, this document can and should be seen in the context of a multiplicity of European initiatives, many of which have long and unmemorable titles but which together add up to a strong commitment to human rights and freedom of religion and beliefs. Second, what is important in this document is its specificity: this isn’t about human rights in general, but about human rights through the lens of freedom of religion and beliefs.

The Guiding Principles

There are three key points that need to be made immediately about these principles: they are inclusive and the focus is always on the joint ‘religions *and* beliefs’; they are written for the context of public schools, though there are issues raised about schools with a religious character; they are within the context of human rights and freedom of thought and conscience. What they are *not* is a curriculum

that can be adopted by member states but, rather, principles and practical guidance, including teachers' education to support their implementation.

It may be helpful to summarise the key TGPs at this point:

- Teaching about religions and beliefs must be fair, accurate and based on sound scholarship; students should learn in an environment that is respectful of human rights, freedoms and civic values
- Teachers should have a commitment to religious freedom
- Teaching should not undermine or ignore the role of families or organisations
- Advisory bodies should be set up that take an inclusive approach, involving different stakeholders
- Where a programme is compulsory there should be opt-out rights
- Teachers should be adequately educated not only in subject matter but also in pedagogical skills
- Curricula and resources should be inclusive, fair, respectful and should avoid inaccurate or prejudicial materials
- Curricula should be in accordance with recognized professional standards
- Teacher preparation should be developed according to democratic and human rights principles and include insight into cultural and religious diversity
- Curricula should give attention to key historical and contemporary development and should reflect global and local issues.

The TGPs also provide other messages (including nine learning outcomes, pp. 48-49) that are important for teachers and other RE professionals, such as the four 'compelling' reasons for teaching about religions and beliefs:

- Religions and beliefs are important for individuals and communities and therefore for society as a whole
- Learning about religions and beliefs contributes to forming and developing self-understanding
- History, literature and culture are unintelligible without knowledge of religions and beliefs
- Knowledge of religions and beliefs can help promote respectful behaviour and enhance social cohesion.

In short 'no educational system can afford to ignore the role of religions and beliefs' and even though in Britain we have, I think, won the argument about the importance of RE, it is reassuring to know that there is European-wide support for the work we are doing. Readers of this publication might well feel that we can rest on our laurels at this point because there is everything here that we would endorse – from teacher training, to the curriculum, to ethos, to resources, to Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) and Agreed Syllabus Conferences (ASCs) as examples of engagement with stakeholders.

What questions arise from the TGP's?

First, there is the question of what is meant by 'public school' in relation to the complex system we have in England with academies, independent schools and schools with a religious character, both aided and controlled. The principles provide appropriate definitions (see p.20) but assert that, even though it is important to respect religious rights, the TGP's can be applicable to private schools so as to ensure that teaching about religions and beliefs is carried out in a balanced manner.

Second, the focus appears to be on teaching *about* religions and beliefs rather than learning *from* them but a closer reading of the document shows that this isn't so; there is plenty of room for the process of 'learning from' and what the interpretative approach, for example, calls 'edification' (Jackson 1997).

A third question is about the opt-out clause to which the TGP's make frequent reference. Despite the possibility of creating a fair, balanced and open curriculum that would enable pupils to learn objectively about religions and beliefs, there remains the possibility of an opt-out clause, again in the name of freedom and a recognition that what may appear to be objective and fair from a professional or secular perspective may not appear so from a different one. This document is itself fair and balanced and recognises the complex and controversial nature of religions and beliefs.

What can we learn from the TGP's?

One of the first lessons for the UK from the TGP's is the equal status of Humanist and other secular beliefs in the context of teaching in the public school. This will be glad tidings to members of the British Humanist Association, and others, and it raises the question not just of what is taught but who counts as a stakeholder. The TGP's seem to give support to the claim that Humanist representatives should have a full place on SACREs and ASCs.

A second lesson, arising from the last of the ten Guiding Principles, is the importance of the socio-political dimensions of religion and the need to explore these more fully in the classroom. This resonates with the call from Ofsted in its 2007 report *Making Sense of Religion* and is an urgent reminder that, as a profession, we need to engage with this area of RE more fully.

A further important issue is about respect. What the TGP's focus on is the *right to* freedom of religion and belief, not '*respect for* religions and beliefs' because, frankly, not all are worthy of respect. This is a significant point in this document and reminds us that we are teaching RE to enable an informed, empathetic but critical engagement with religions and beliefs.

The TGP's also remind us that respect for religions and beliefs doesn't happen automatically as a result of teaching *about* - though it does recognise the importance of dispelling ignorance. This is an area on which we need to continue to work. Young people's presuppositions, stereotypes and misconceptions need, not just to be taken on board, but to be the starting point of an education which is directly relevant to them and driven by their questions and their needs. These are complex and difficult needs to meet in the classroom and they raise huge challenges for teachers, but they are too important (and dangerous) to neglect.

There is a further challenge from the TGP's and that is to involve parents and families in teaching about religions and beliefs. This links well to the Community Cohesion agenda in our schools so that they identify and address the needs of their own minority populations and not just those that are statistically significant nationally. The non-statutory National Framework has opened up the possibility of teaching about religions other than the six major world faiths and here is a reminder, from Europe, that we need to look at the curriculum from a very local perspective. What exciting opportunities are arising! And, before I hear an objection, remember that agreed syllabuses are the minimum

requirements for schools: there is every reason to expand on what is required there, as long as it is congruent with the agreed syllabus' principles and pedagogy.

The final major issue which arises from the TGPs is the difficult question of freedom of thought, conscience and religion as a human right and this can be uncomfortable when we are faced with thoughts and beliefs that are not only different from our own but in stark contrast to what most people believe in our liberal democracy. There are questions about fundamentalist and extremist views that we need to approach with great care and these principles remind us that people can believe whatever they like. As long as their behaviour and speech are within the law, their right to freedom remains. There is an often-stated irony here: the promotion of toleration for those whose attitudes and beliefs are intolerant of me and my beliefs. What, as RE teachers, do we do with religious communities that seem to be at odds with the need/demand/desire to promote respect and mutual toleration?

There are some answers to this. The first is to remember that we are engaged in an open, educational and objective process. The TGPs suggest that we apply the lens of human rights to some of the views, literature and actions of intolerant groups and see what pupils make of them and that we should use the teachings of religions that promote toleration and challenge hatred and division.

The second is to be more careful in our use of terms such as 'fundamentalist', 'radical', 'extremist' and 'violent extremist' and, in the case of Islam which is where much of the focus of this debate currently is, 'Islamist'. These are all complex terms and need careful unpacking. None of them are is?? synonymous with the others. Fundamentalist is not a pejorative term but can and is used pejoratively. We need to be careful if we are to meet the principles from Toledo about freedom and human rights.

A final reflection

The call in October 2008 from Ed Balls, the Secretary of State for Education, for schools to tackle violent extremism and the publication of a toolkit to support teachers was largely welcomed by teacher unions and there is no doubt that teachers need all the support they can get to deal with difficult and controversial issues in the classroom. But, I question the language that he uses. He refers to 'core British values of tolerance, liberty, fairness and the rule of law'. These are not 'British' values – they are the values of Europe, as seen in this document. Indeed they are basic human values and no one society can appropriate them for their own ends. Second, the language he uses is unhelpful - 'promoting toleration and respect' would be far more positive and less divisive than 'tackling violent extremism'. In an article in *The Guardian* he identifies the Schools Linking Network as an example of what he wants. This was part of the work of my team in Bradford and we did not see our work as tackling extremism but promoting a more just and cohesive society.

The wise words of the TGPs could help us in Britain.

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