

Discussing the Present and Future of Religious Education in Schools

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Organized by UPF and Youth UPF

Lord Nazir Ahmed of Rotherham (our host for the evening)

Lord Nazir Ahmed of Rotherham welcomed everyone to the House of Lords, sharing some of his background and passion for the topic of Religious Education, emphasizing the common religious teaching of peace and brotherhood, caring and sharing with everyone as well as lamenting the fact that opportunists use religion to further political aims.

Dr. Bertil Persson (comparative religion expert, educator, Swedish government advisor)



Dr. Bertil Persson started by discussing the many and varied, often contradictory, emotions and notions that the word religion evokes in people. He introduced Ninian Smart's definition which has been adopted by the UN and other instances, emphasizing religion as a belief system informing an individual's worldview and values. Dr. Persson stressed that this definition gives rise to two possibilities: Life-affirming and Life-denying religion. The former is

safeguarded in the first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. To give a true understanding, the materials and curricula used for Religious Education (RE) in schools should be devised in close partnership with the representatives of religious communities. Textbooks, for example, should be firmly anchored in the primary Holy Scriptures and the drafts need to be approved by official representatives of the relevant religious traditions before publication. Also, at the core of the 'spirit of brotherhood' formulation in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we find the Golden Rule which is upheld by all Life-affirming religions. We need to emphasize this in order to discern the falseness of Life-denying religions, like Neo-Nazism and Jihadism, which warp the peace-loving messages of Christianity and Islam. By going to the root of every religion, we can find the Life-affirming essence that unites them.

Mr. Alan Rainer (RE teacher, poet, interfaith activist)

Mr. Alan Rainer began by reminding us of the silence from which we were created. In this silence we can understand ourselves through the great God-given gift of self-reflection. He lamented that the true meaning of religion has been lost in this world, forgetting that we are spiritual beings. An RE teacher should live a holy life as an example to the rest of us. Good RE is essential and should be considered as a complement to Citizenship Education. RE needs to be developed, bringing in experts from the community into the schools, so that it is taught without bias and foster unity. Mr. Rainer described the uphill battle he has fought as a RE teacher, against governmental boards and educational associations where RE is seldom valued or properly understood. He asked us all to be "Royal Priests" who can stand up to the world and change it.

Sheikh Dr. Ramzy (Islamic scholar, imam)

Sheikh Dr. Ramzy expressed his regret over the unprecedentedly poor state of RE in Britain today, viewed as a scary nuisance by the government and squeezed out of the school curriculum. He pointed out the hypocrisy of promoting multiculturalism and integration whilst neglecting the importance of understanding each other's faiths. Teaching religion teaches children about the belief systems they will encounter in life, creating integration and respect. Without it, we end up with ignorance and division. To belittle the religious traditions is to deny their role in shaping our societies and moral values as they are today. In fact, RE is very much a human right and an integral part of liberal democracy. It encourages children to be open-minded and think outside the box. Furthermore, we should not view the involvement of local religious communities in RE with suspicion but see how it can aid humanity in coming together in understanding and tolerance.

Ms. Daniela Duhur (BA Theology student)

Ms. Daniela Duhur explained that there exist mixed perceptions about what RE is and what it should be about. A common misconception is that religion is irrelevant in today's society. But when we study the history of the church in Britain, we are more or less studying the history of Britain itself. Yet this is still a partial picture. Too seldom is Christianity traced back to its Middle Eastern roots. We should not treat religious history as British church history, but as the history of all peoples. How should religion be taught

then? It needs to be done in diverse ways, highlighting the many expressions and internal complexities of all religions. We cannot only look at the negative aspects of religious activity but should look at the positive practical applications of religion in history and presently. Looking at religious philosophy, doctrine, and practice, we should find the relevance of religion today.

Ms. Anita Chandel (teaching assistant, charity founder)

Ms. Anita Chandel opened with a Hindu peace prayer and the question ‘Does religion separate or integrate us?’ When a baby is born, that baby is a pure being of love, a blessing from God. RE needs to be taught at a young age, and most importantly, we need to be taught the universal language of love. ‘Be together, not the same.’ What makes us different is culture, language, color, and faith, but ultimately we are the same since we are all children of God. And children need to be heard. When a child is born, it encompasses all the wisdom and ability that will allow it to succeed. When children grow up, many lose their voice and potential to become all that they can be. We must endeavor to nurture the mentors of tomorrow, the child-like gurus who have their potentiality stripped of them. They will be the adults of tomorrow, with self-belief, hope, courage, unity, and love and respect for all. It is at the early stages of school life that we can see the unity of this diverse mix of children. Let us take on the qualities that they possess.

Abdullah Ramzy (GCSE student)

Abdullah Ramzy shared his first-hand perspective of RE in his schools. He felt that not enough time is spent on studying religion and that there is not enough depth. As a result, RE is seen as boring by most students and it is usually disliked. This does not fulfil RE’s full potential. We should invite religious experts from the communities who can give lived, direct knowledge. RE is so important because it can create integration and friendship. When we know about each other, this creates bonds and understanding. The approach to RE should be reconsidered, so that students can feel more comfortable in their multicultural surroundings and so that they no longer will resent the subject.

Ms. Patricia Caesar (educational entrepreneur, charity founder)

In closing, Ms. Patricia Caesar asked us to look at the small plants she handed out. They tell us that we all come from the same source, although we are unique in many ways. All of the talks this evening highlighted that we share the same origin. Nobody can change their origin, so do not try to change anybody and be yourself.