

Report from Bridget Knight

NASACRE AGM 8 May 2008

Keynote Speaker: Karen Armstrong “The Great Transformation”

It is obvious to all of us that we are holding the key to humanity in our hands at this time. If we lose the young, we are all lost.

Religion plays a part in this. It is not the cause of terrorism - that is a political imbalance in the world, bad governance and ongoing conflict - but is a fault line. When violence becomes endemic, religion can get sucked in.

Religions are not great monolithic blocks: they are diverse and multiple. Nor are they static: they evolve, grow and adapt to their circumstances. If they do not, they wither away. Each tradition represents a constant dialogue until transcend once and a reality on the ground.

It is important to note that for all our spectacular achievements in modernity it has also been the most violent in history. Because modernity has been violent; everything is affected by violence, even football and schooling. Religion also picks up this violent strain.

200-900 BC- is the period where all the great religions had their roots, and emerged in different parts of the world, all differently but with commonalities. These religions survived not only because they moved people but became their word practical application. Religions teachings are not meant to be cast in stone. The Buddha compared his teachings to a raft that has its uses but should not be a burden for you in terms of quibbling over facts, opinions and speculations. Participation over such things is often a matter of ego and we tend to be an opinionated society.

Religion is not about believing certain credal propositions- it means an engagement and commitment to certain concepts that can only point beyond themselves to the divine. Religion is about doing things in such a way that transforms you at a deeper level so that we become most fully aware. We must lose the ego through not that.

Religion and art both seek to find that which makes us special in a world that is complex and often tragic. Ego and self-preoccupation are the biggest enemies to spiritual development. The first thing the prophet Mohammad did was to introduce the posture of humility for prayer, for surrender of the ego to the divine. Jesus taught the same lesson, emptying himself of ego and accepting the debasement of death on the cross. Paul exhorts us to have the same mind as Jesus and put other people first.

You will not understand the meaning of religion unless you put it into practice.

In every case, the catalyst for major religious change came from the renouncement of violence.

We need to make people aware of the fact that the prophet Mohammed practised non-violence. All the major traditions evolved the Golden Rule “ do not do to others what you would not have done to you”. Confucius advises us to look into our heart and see what gives us pain, and to not do these things to others. This introduced people to transcendence and to walk the way of the golden rule. This leads us to compassion and brings us into our relationship with God.

Each of the religious traditions insisted that you could not confine your compassion to those in our ‘group’: “Love our enemies” (and we should appreciate the wit of Jesus here in saying this and not only see him as a solemn man). In Judaism there is constant reference to empathy and the reverence towards strangers.

Ego makes us hold onto slights and persist with anger towards our enemies. It is by overcoming our initial revulsion towards a stranger we become aware of the challenging otherness that is God i.e. God is not necessarily just a cosy manifestation of our own selves.

We need religion that teaches us to recognise the divinity in the other. This demands a very well considered approach, to give all our religious traditions a nudge in the right direction and to encourage all our religious to venerate the other.

Questions to Karen Armstrong:

How can we create QCA’s ‘compelling learning experiences’ for all our children through RE?

Companion is a very rigorous discipline and requires constant application to feel empathy with others.

There is no religious teaching that is not translatable into action; otherwise the action is drained of meaning.

The major religious teaching challenge of our time is to build a global community – if they fail at this they fail as religions.

Teach and introduce pupils to examples of companion and loving kindness - through action in major religions.

We must teach that feelings must point beyond themselves to action and therefore we need to teach our young people to move beyond the self conceit of anger to use that feeling to channel it to make the world a better place. Where are our examples of non-violent action that has produced positive change? How can justice be furthered ethically produced positive change? How can justice be furthered ethically and morally, and how can pressure be put on politicians to this end?

KA proposed teaching the nature of myth to children so that they better understand what is superstition and what is religion. The benchmark is the golden rule: if the religion leads you to practise compassion towards others it is good. We must transmit the relevance and fascination of RE as a subject so that children don't see RE as an irrelevant anachronism but does not heal the troubles of our time.

Further notes from NASARCE AGM:

- **Mark Chater, QCA** (Appendix 1)

Please see RE update April 2008 QCA report on RE. Mark welcomes any comments on this document direct to him.

- NASACRE predicts that costs running costs may well rise over the next year. There will be a grant that may be used to recruit personnel from minority ethnic groups to represent on SACRE (50,000 over 2 years)
 - Recruitment and training grant.
- Training programmes will be offered to new SACRE members on a regional basis.

Alan Brine, HMI (Appendix 2)

Please see NASACRE AGM May 2008 OFSTED report.

The outcomes of inspection into the contribution of RE to community cohesion revealed a very positive link between these two. It also revealed how difficult it can be for schools to organise multi faith events because of concern about parental response.

Attention will next go to creative approaches to RE in an effort to shift 60% satisfactory teaching in RE be good.

Guidance has been issued to all sections 5 inspectors to clarify inspection of RE in academics, and where there are issues of non – compliance.

Alan Brine has instituted a train of all Section 5 reports. RE was referenced in 71% of reports since Autumn 07. He will then compare current inspections to see if the new community cohesion requirements will lead to more references to RE.

Date of next AGM: 5 June 2009, Birmingham

Progress on the RE Strategy

Prof Brian Gates, Chair of the RE Council

Jim Knight announced a joint NASACRE QCA conference the governments intention to support the RE action plan for development.

6 main strategies of action plan in partnership with RE Council and DCSF.

1. Continuing the RE partnership at a national level between the DCSF and RE Council. This is a determination to act together and do things in the best interest of RE.
2. Updating the guidance on religions education.
 - i.e. new guidance in place of what circular 1|94 safe in relation to both RE and SACRE, taking into account and co-co, but deferring on CW. This takes account of SEAL and Community Cohesion.
 - Advice on collective worship could follow but this is not included in the above.
3. Providing better support for RE subject teachers
 - Assisting NATURE to develop its activities with and for teachers.
4. Supporting the effectiveness of local SACRES
5. Supporting the development of a CPD handbook for RE teachers
 - In consultation with QCA and OFSTED.
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6. An external review of the nature of materials as commonly used by schools for teaching world religions. 3 or 4 universities have now been invited to tender and the project is expected to be completed by the end of the Summer 2009.

Process for developing the new Guidance:

- Managed by the RE council on behalf of the DCSF.
- With a writing team and Steering Group, drawn from fair communities.
- Serviced by John Beast and Sarah Smalley.

Launch of new guidance: 14 October 2009