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### **Context:**

The great lockdown of 2020 caused so many events and gatherings to be cancelled in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, including the AULRE 2020 Annual Conference. Thus it is with great pleasure that through this Special Edition of the JRE something of what would have been presented at our conference can be shared with those who have an interest in Religious Education (RE). When preparing for the conference we deliberately chose a title that is very wide ranging and it used for this Special Edition: *AULRE 2020: RE Matters*. The eight articles presented here reflect the differing ways in which this theme can be taken. From impassioned reflections on the reasons why RE *still* matters as an important part of the school curriculum, to a range of matters or issues which are currently impacting on differing aspects of Religious Education in one part of the world particularly in relation to the Commission on Religious Education's Final Report. Taken together, the articles in this Special Edition provide a fascinating snapshot into the areas of active research and interest concerning RE in the UK. As such they stand as apt ways of embodying what would have been another important and successful annual conference.

The AULRE annual conference has become an increasingly important focal point for those of us in the UK (and beyond) who are involved with RE teacher education/training and research in the field of Religious Education, to collaborate and further our research together. In recent years it has been necessary to expand the provision for presenting short papers at the conference in order to make suitable space for over fifty presentations which have been selected by the conference committee - alongside high quality keynote addresses. Despite the precarious times for Religious Education in the UK, there is a committed and strong research community working on projects which are of international and national significance. The AULRE 2020 conference was scheduled to take place at Newman University, in May 2020. In this special edition two of the planned three keynotes are presented, from Dr Janet Orchard and Dr Emma Salter. The other articles were originally submitted as short papers and we are grateful to the work and time put into developing these into high quality articles. The eight papers are indicative of the quality we have come to expect at the AULRE annual conferences. In selecting the papers for this special edition, as well as preparing the

conference, the AULRE Executive have played pivotal role. Particular thanks needs to go to Dr Emma Salter and Dr Linda Whitworth for their role in the Review Panel.

The first paper, by Dr Janet Orchard, puts an intriguing spin on the theme, by engaging with the loaded question of whether or not RE *still* matters? Dr Orchard gives an affirmative answer by drawing on an argument framed by an established philosophical discussion of reasons for compulsory RE in schools. These are considered in turn, with particular reference to the RE curriculum in both England and South Africa, understanding that general principles need applying to specific cases. One justification – based on socialisation or acculturation – remains the most politically compelling argument for RE in community schools, connected with promoting ‘religious literacy’ through the subject. Whether or not this link exists and how it might be promoted in practice remain in some doubt. This leads Dr Orchard to question whether having one specific aim for RE is either necessary or desirable as has been suggested, given how well other potentially justifiable reasons can be seen to inter-relate. Although Dr Orchard is relatively pessimistic for the future of non-elective RE in those English community schools where no-one is able to champion the subject effectively. The future looks brighter in faith-based contexts, which might include ‘religiously vibrant’ South Africa, once the relationship between religious and political literacy is clearly identified. She argues that RE for all does still matter very much, as an entitlement which may contribute to the flourishing of many children and young people where it is taught well and adequately resourced.

The second paper, by Dr Emma Salter notices that faith-practitioners’ involvement, as visiting speakers or study-visit hosts, is a recommended teaching strategy in secular RE. It examines problems of authentic representation of religious traditions in secular RE and evaluates the extent to which faith-practitioners’ involvement as a learning strategy can address authentic representation of religions as a learning principle. Empirical data for the paper is drawn from four qualitative interviews with faith-practitioners from different Christian denominations about their preferred representations of Christianity during secular RE study-visits to their churches. The paper finds that faith-practitioners’ preferred representations can be categorised as insider-institutional (denominational) and insider-personal. Together, these types of representation can complement authenticity in the representation of religions in RE because they offer particular, rather than generalised, accounts of religious traditions.

The third paper, composed by Professor Robert Bowie, reports first time in full, a seed corn pilot study that presents a moment of the collective consciousness of an RE department in the midst of curriculum change. It records their concerns about the impact of increased content on depth in a new exam course, and the particular consequence this has for the kind of learning happening around texts. It reveals concerns about the representation of religion in the curriculum, the distance between that representation and teacher's perceptions of pupils' spiritual and religious lives. It also identifies teachers sense of fear and guilt about the challenge of fulfilling their duties to pupils, the secular authorities and the Catholic authorities, and reveals insights around the question of science of religion. In this single focus group, the collective consciousness of an RE department captures many key issues of significance in RE today.

The fourth article, by Professor Stephen McKinney, homes in on the educational impact of the 2020 global pandemic. Covid-19 and the subsequent worldwide lockdowns have had a major impact on families and school education. The lockdowns have highlighted and exacerbated the disadvantages experienced by those children who suffer from child poverty. This article focuses on food insecurity and the digital divide, or digital exclusion, and argues that these have emerged as even more pressing issues during lockdowns for children suffering from child poverty. The article provides an outline of the response of the Catholic Church and Catholic schools, primarily in the United Kingdom, and argues that for those children who experience digital exclusion, this is effectively exclusion from the religious education, religious life, community and the pastoral and spiritual support that is normally offered by the Catholic school.

In the fifth contribution, Dr Ruth Flanagan subjects the concept of worldview to critical scrutiny. The article explains how term 'worldviews' is employed across disciplinary boundaries, yet with no agreed definition it may actually obscure rather than clarify meaning. The use of the term has grown in frequency, particularly in RE in England, since the Commission on Religious Education's Final Report (2018), which recommended changing the name of RE to 'Religion and worldviews'. Response to the report has been mixed. Some fear that an introduction of worldviews may lead to a dilution of RE and overburden an already overstretched teaching profession; others welcome a meaningful study of non-religious worldviews which they view as more pertinent in the current growth of those

who adhere to ‘no faith’. Ultimately, teaching worldviews raises questions of selection: are all worldviews equally appropriate for pupils to study and consistent with the aims of education? For example, is it appropriate for a 6 year old to study Hedonism or National Socialism? This paper problematises the binary nature of the debate and interrogates the usage of the term ‘worldviews’. Rather than consider worldviews as a discrete body of knowledge that imposes on an already overburdened curriculum, I propose that employing worldviews as an overarching concept, providing a type of paradigmatic analysis for RE, may lead to a greater and more profound understanding of religion(s).

The sixth paper maintains the focus on issues triggered off by the commission on Religious Education. In it Dr Linda Whitworth reviews the recommendations in the Final Report for at least twelve hours for ‘all forms of primary Initial Teacher Education’ (CORE 2018, p. 15), challenging the current provision of many primary ITE providers. Information gathered by the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE 2018) and others demonstrates the need to improve not only the hours taught, but also the quality of provision across all training routes. Many beginner teachers lack confidence in their RE subject knowledge and fear causing offence (NATRE 2018; Whitworth 2017). If RE is to play a valid part in a 21<sup>st</sup> century primary curriculum, training needs to address these concerns and develop understanding of the complex knowledge the subject requires. This paper explores aspects of knowledge in RE, the importance of developing pedagogies in response to knowledge and considers a project which responds directly to the Commission’s report.

Another paper engaging with the Commission on Religious Education is by Dr Sean Whittle, which offers an evaluation of the Catholic response to the Final Report. The reasons why such a significant education provider might take a hesitant stance to the findings of the CoRE is deeply intriguing and stands in need of careful scrutiny. After offering a brief overview of both the importance and content of the Final Report, a summary of the Catholic response to it will be presented. Then the paper offers an analysis and some likely explanations for the form and content of this response. Finally, Dr Whittle argues that on theological and ethical grounds a far more positive and detailed response could have been offered to the Final Report in order to help bring about the much needed recommendations that the CoRE called for.

In the final paper in this AULRE special Edition, Dr Matthew Vince focuses on the issue of how Muslim RE teachers manage their identities in relation to being neutral. Beginning with

the longstanding criticism of the whiteness of the professional discourses in teaching the paper draws attention to Bariso's (2001) analysis that where whiteness is constructed as being professional then blackness is constructed as unprofessional, in turn excluding blackness from the construction of the teacher. Similarly, Bhopal (2015) argues that this presents a clash between embodying blackness and embodying the teacher. With the turn to research surrounding Muslim teachers, attributes of Muslimness have also been shown to be a source of marginalisation within school contexts (Shah 2016). Accordingly, in this paper Dr Vince explores how 'Muslim RE teachers' characterise 'becoming neutral' as the formative part of becoming an RE teacher. However, this was particularly challenging due to the hypervisibility of their Muslimness, particularly for female Muslim teachers. These challenges are then framed as an issue of whiteness, disproportionately affecting those who do not fit the white teacher norm. The conclusion of the paper is an argument for the pressing need to change how 'neutrality' is understood.

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Guest Editors: Sean Whittle (Vice-chair of AULRE) with Stephen McKinney (Chair of AULRE)