



AULRE 2023: Theory, policy and practice in RE—is this a time of divergence?

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This 2023 special edition of the Journal of Religious Education is the fourth special edition devoted to papers that were presented at the AULRE conference. The previous special editions were published in 2020, 2021 and 2022. The 2023 conference was held at Newman University Birmingham on the 18th and 19th of May. The keynote speakers were Dr David Lewin who spoke on including RE into a model of general didactics, Paul Smalley who spoke on historical and contemporary challenges for RE in England and Dr Ruth Wareham who spoke on Death knell or revival? Navigating religious education in the age of the non-religious. All of these keynotes have been written up as articles for this special edition.

There was a very interesting variety of papers that addressed the conference theme and wider issues in religious education. There were two important panel discussions during the conference. The first was on ‘Troubling times for RE ITE’ that broached the subject of the decrease in uptake for RE in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) institutions across the UK and the threat of closure of some of the departments of RE in ITE providers. The second panel was directed at the closely related challenge of ‘Recruitment of teachers for RE’, again a serious issue across the UK. The panel discussions and updates from England and Wales, Ireland and Scotland were a welcome opportunity to engage with some of the very real and live issues that are besetting RE in the UK and Ireland.

All who delivered a paper were invited to submit their papers for peer review and possible inclusion in this special edition. The debate about the worldviews approach in the English RE curriculum continued to be a major talking point in the conference. However, there was a wide range of papers presented at the conference and this special edition provides some very good examples of this range. This special edition includes articles on: RE within a model of general didactics (Lewin); key contemporary challenges faced by religious education and religious educators in England (Smalley); the implications of the rise of the number of people who identify as non-religious (Wareham); different approaches to worldviews (Flanagan, Plater); the paradox of interreligious inclusivity (PIRI) (Moulin); the interdisciplinary encounter between science teachers and RE teachers in secondary

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schools (Bowie et al.); the reception of Muslim converts in the west in educational contexts (Olusola); the relationship between Theology and Religious Studies and RE (Benoit & Hutchings); an initial appraisal of the Religious Education Directory (RED) for Catholic schools in England (Whittle) and, finally, the inclusion of young people in the Catholic Synod 2021–2024 and the Catholic Church (McKinney).

The three keynotes provided rich stimulus for the conference participants, as is evident in the articles presented in this special edition. David Lewin focuses on some educational theories from the German tradition of what is sometimes called ‘continental pedagogy’. He argues that the German tradition provides a model of didactics. In applying this model of didactics, RE would not be abstracted and not considered to be a separate part of the curriculum. Instead, it could be considered to be part of general didactics. The article presents and contextualizes the work of Wagenschein and Klafki, educational theorists who are not well known among Anglophone theorists of RE, but who offer insightful considerations of the holistic formation of the person to which RE can make a vital contribution.

The article by Paul Smalley draws on his extensive scholarship and experience and addresses some of the key contemporary challenges faced by religious education and religious educators in England. He looks at the construction of the curriculum, especially in the Academies that have emerged since the late twentieth century. He tracks the debates about whether there should be a locally agreed syllabus. The paper examines arguments about the representation of religions in RE that is promoted by those with a vested interest in presenting a favourable impression of religion. He also provides an insightful overview of the (at times) heated debate about the introduction of worldviews. He concludes with some alarming figures about the low level of funding for RE and the serious reduction in the recruitment of a sufficient number of adequately qualified teachers for RE in England.

Ruth Wareham tracks the rise of the number of people who identify as non-religious in the 2021 census. She argues that it is likely that this will have increased by the time of the next census. This leads to questions about the (often contentious) inclusion of non-religious views in RE. Wareham engages in debate with the ideas of two leading academic thinkers in RE: David Aldridge and Philip L Barnes. She explores the advantages and disadvantages of excluding non-religious worldviews from RE and the legal position of inclusion of non-religious views in the curriculum. Dr Wareham brings a mature set of arguments to this debate and offers some valuable insights into the legal position and the future possibilities for RE.

Ruth Flanagan opens up a fascinating area of research in her article in her discussion of the possible influence of the personal worldviews of teachers on their choice of substantive knowledge in RE. Her findings from her research indicate that this is the case, and she argues that further research is required to deepen our understanding of this influence. This article grapples with some of the underlying key issues and questions about RE that continue to attract serious attention. What is substantive knowledge in RE? What are the power dynamics at play in the configuration and presentation of substantive knowledge? Who are the key stakeholders who influence the content of RE and influence how religions are represented in the curriculum? What role and influence does the teacher of RE have? The issue of knowledge is also a main feature of the article by Sean Whittle (see below) in his appraisal of the new RE curriculum for Catholic schools in England.

Mark Plater identifies a serious gap in the current debate on worldviews: an understanding of what is meant by a ‘personal’ worldview. He uses Fowler’s faith development theory and applies it to a religion and worldviews emphasis in religious education. He provides a close analysis and critique of the seven stages of Fowler’s theory and a move towards ‘styles’ rather than ‘stages’ of faith (as proposed by Streib). This

reconfiguration to ‘styles’ also removes the contentious seventh stage (or style) of Fowler’s theory. Dr Plater argues that Fowler’s faith development is a useful lens to understand an individual’s personal worldview. This is a very thoughtful and scholarly contribution to this special edition.

Daniel Moulin probes the range of internal understandings within religion and the ways in which religions relate to each other. This well-constructed article provides a contemporary philosophical reflection on the paradox of interreligious inclusivity (PIRI). The article illustrates this with three scenarios that demonstrate the inherent challenges in an over simplistic approach to inclusivity. Dr Moulin presents a series of premises in an attempt to balance the exclusivity/inclusivity of religion.

Bob Bowie and his co-authors examine the interdisciplinary encounter between science teachers and RE teachers in secondary schools. The team have conceptualised this science religion encounter (SRE) with reference to epistemic trespass (ET). In this article SREs are engagements in RE or in science lessons.

This article has its origins in a project investigating the beginning teacher [the student teacher and early career teacher (ECT)] and the science religion encounter in the classroom. The article reports that SREs are strongly connected to ET whether they occur in a spontaneous manner or are a deliberate intervention. Delving deeper into this area of research, they explore the concept of epistemic neighbourliness. The article then presents some findings from field work. This latest publication from the research project provides another set of conceptual tools and empirical insights to navigate the science and religion encounter in secondary schools.

Jeremiah O. A. Olusola tackles the issue of conversion to Islam in the west. He helpfully clarifies the following terms: agonism; post-secularism and secular(ism/ist) before providing an overview of some theories about conversion to Islam in the west. He argues that there is an over emphasis on counterculture and cultural resistance as a means to understand conversion and insufficient emphasis on the religious content of conversion. The paper then proceeds to present and consider some results from a narrative-ethnography investigating the conversion narratives, identity configurations and educational experiences of fifteen millennial-born British Muslim converts. He provides some interesting, and disturbing, reflections from the participants on their encounters with educational systems and with the mixed reaction and acceptance by others after their conversion.

Céline Benoit and Tim Hutchings revisit the relationship between Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) and RE and the debate about the academic status of RE. Benoit and Hutchings map out some of the ways in which the relationship can be understood, improved and strengthened. Teachers of RE are experts in the theory of education, including pedagogy and curriculum design and can support TRS academics in these areas. Greater collaboration between TRS academics and RE teachers can enhance recruitment to degree programmes in TRS. This greater collaboration can also include knowledge exchange about what has been learned in school and what skills have been developed by young people. Further TRS and RE can share a common interest in lived religion. The two authors argue that TRS specialists can support the development of materials and resources for use in the classroom. They see the inclusion of worldviews as an opportunity for renewed dialogue between the disciplines.

Two articles explore recent developments in relation to RE and youth in the Catholic church. Sean Whittle presents an initial appraisal of the Religious Education Directory (RED), the new curriculum for RE in Catholic schools in England, as approved by the hierarchy of England. Stephen McKinney highlights the inclusion of youth in the life of the Catholic Church as highlighted by the work of the Synod 2021–2024.

Sean Whittle presents an initial appraisal of the Religious Education Directory (RED). The new RE curriculum appears to be carefully constructed and is 'knowledge rich'. The RED document is published in a weighty tome. Dr Whittle weighs up the advantages and disadvantages of this knowledge rich curriculum and the overtly catechetical approach that has been adopted in the Catholic RE curriculum. In some respects, it may be expected to increase the credibility of RE in the Catholic school and justify the 10% allotted to this subject in the school curriculum. It may allay fears that children and young people do not receive an adequate education in Catholic Christianity in Catholic schools. However, Dr Whittle raises epistemological concerns about a knowledge rich curriculum, and the theological paradigms adopted in this curriculum. He raises further concerns about the use of a spiral curriculum and the catechetical approach. Dr Whittle provides some valuable initial insights and rightly comments that this is the beginning of a longer and deeper debate.

Stephen McKinney addresses another contemporary issue: the participation of youth in the Catholic Synod 2021–2024. The Synod recovers the Vatican II vision of a pilgrim Church—a group of people on a journey together. Professor McKinney proposes that this is an ideal opportunity to listen to the voices of the young people in the Catholic Church and consider their concerns and anxieties about the Church and also their hopes and aspirations. He surveys a sample of recent research on the affiliation and disaffiliation of young people and the discussion on the inclusion of young people in three documents submitted as part of the synodal process. These are the response documents from England and Wales, Ireland and Scotland which include sections that summarise the comments about the relationship between young people and the Church. While all of this is very helpful, there remain serious questions about how young people can and will be included in local churches and the wider Church. How can the twenty-first century Catholic Church respond to their desire 'to be' Church rather than 'do' Church. This will require a rethinking of roles and structures for greater levels of genuine inclusion of young people. Ultimately, both of these articles open up thinking about the models of RE that will be required in a Catholic school to enable young people to participate in the life of the contemporary (and future) Catholic Church.

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Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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