

REPORT ON NASACRE AGM
Thursday 8th May 2008

Notes from Anne Gibbons

I was grateful to be given the opportunity to attend the AGM as representative for Bracknell Forest SACRE. It was a most interesting day.

Keynote Address by Karen Armstrong: *The Great Transformation.*

Karen Armstrong is a historian of religion and an original thinker on the role of religion in the modern world. She has written many books, the latest of which, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* informed the main theme of her talk. She refers to herself as a 'freelance monotheist'.

Religion is often cited as a cause of violence and terrorism – but the reasons for violence are not religious, but political. Violence happens when people are under attack. It is important to go back to the origins of religion – to what she terms the *axial period*, from 900 – 200 BCE, during which all the major religions have their roots. She included Buddhism/Hinduism, Monotheism in Israel, Confucianism/Daoism. All developed an awareness of a transcendent reality (to Christians, God.). She thinks we need to discover common ancient values.

In essence, religion is not just about belief. The word *credo*, in its original form, meant 'I give my heart'. Religion is about doing things. The first essential is to get rid of egotism. Among the examples she used was the characteristic posture of prostration in Islam – a symbol of surrender of self to the divine. And Jesus (Paul's letter to the Philippians) "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave". The basis of Christianity, she thinks, is ethical, not doctrinal. Christians are led to put other people first.

Religion is a catalyst for change, a revulsion against violence, which is a way of defending the ego. Buddhism is about non-harm, no cross word or impatient gesture. Jesus told his followers to turn the other cheek. Mohammed sought to make peace from a warring, tribal society. *Jihad* essentially means struggle – not holy war. Rabbi Hillel emphasised the Torah teachings about behaviour to one's neighbour. All are about compassion and concern for *everyone*. Jesus' command to 'love your enemies' does not mean sentimental love but looking out for the interests of others. In Leviticus, the priestly strand of Jewish law, there is a constant emphasis on reconciliation and love for neighbour and the stranger. And when Abraham (Genesis 18) offered the three strangers hospitality, there was a divine presence. Even the Greeks, long before the axial age, used Greek tragedy to show shared grief and a common humanity.

The thread running through all religions is the **Golden Rule**: *Do not do unto others that which you would not have done to yourself.* This is the kind of religion we need to teach our children. We must teach them to venerate the faith of the other.

A short 'buzz' discussion in pairs was followed by Question Time with Karen Armstrong. There were many questions and comments from the delegates, including

a discussion about the contrasting accounts of Adam's creation in Genesis 1 and 2. Karen's view is that Adam represents humanity and from 'made in God's image' we might understand that to hurt or slander another person is to desecrate the name of God. She sees the main challenge for educators as that of building a global community. Among the concerns expressed were how to put the teaching of the golden rule into practice in the classroom and how to deal with the lack of respect for all religions shown by some secularists. A lot of food for thought!

The Business Meeting took place after lunch.

The Chair's report:

- The Executive has responded to the new reporting format for SACRES from QCA and the Ofsted long report *Making sense of Religion*.
- Members of the Executive attended the launch of Islam Awareness week and contributed to conferences organised by Teachers' TV.
- The Executive also works with Partners such as the Religious Education Council for England and Wales, QCA and DCSF and the Community Cohesion Unit.
- It is important to keep in touch using the NASACRE website. It gives suggestions for agenda items for SACREs and helps to keep up with current debates. It is the *only* means of accessing SACRE News.
- NASACRE administration is now being supported at the South London Multifaith and Multicultural Resources Centre, Lewisham, by Yvonne Cameron, the Centre Administrator.
- A database has now been set up for SACRE information, including contact details and vacancy information. All SACRE clerks/administrators are asked to inform NASACRE of any changes to local SACRES.

The Treasurer's Report:

- Budget planning has been affected by the sudden move from Westhill RE Centre, now part of Birmingham University, the need to find a new base, and the interim arrangements with the Lewisham Centre. This has made it necessary to suspend the hard copy printing of SACRE News.
- Some invoices for the 2007 AGM have still not been paid by SACRES. In spite of the unclear future, however, the finances appear to be in a sound state. As in recent years, funding from the Westhill trustees enabled NASACRE to award grants for Young People's Interfaith Projects. **The Secretary's Report: The main focus was on recruitment and training for SACRE members.**
- The funding allocated (£50k pa for two years) is only sufficient to target potential new SACRE members. Two regions will be grouped together into a training cohort. Two cohorts will be trained in each year, one cohort to be inclusive across Group A and the other to be confined to minority faith recruitment. A database of current vacancies in all SACRES will be used to target recruitment. The training roll-out will start from April 2008 to March 2009, the first phase to cover LAs in the South West and a joint cohort of the East of England and the South East regions. The programme will be managed by NASACRE with reference to the RE Council. There will be face to face training on the two conference days and field work between them to include an accompanied visit to school to observe an RE lesson.

Elections Julie Groves was re-appointed Honorary Secretary. Jo Fageant and Tricia Martin were elected to the Executive Committee, all for a period of 3 years.

Update from HMI (Alan Brine):

- NASACRE's welcome contribution to Ofsted's 2007 report '*Making Sense of Religion*', is available at www.ofsted.gov.uk.
- Ofsted is developing guidance about the inclusion of community cohesion in inspections.
- The 2008 HMI RE Conference (20th May) will focus on pedagogy in RE. It will bring together the RSAs supporting the roll-out of the secondary curriculum. QCA will be represented. It is hoped to provide ideas about extending guidance linked to the non-statutory national framework.
- Among issues raised around the country are how SACREs can monitor the provision for RE/CW and the effectiveness of their Agreed Syllabus; and the implications for RE and SACREs of the new requirement to promote community cohesion – to be inspected from Sept 2008. Worries are expressed about how Ofsted can evaluate CC in a short inspection. The SEF is a trigger for inspection.
- The focus for the coming year is on creative thinking in RE (Section 5).

Update from QCA (Mark Chater):

- The Rose Review of the Primary Curriculum will be supported by QCA. The aim is to take the national framework for RE into the new primary curriculum on a NS basis.
- RE will be included in the new Humanities Diploma.
- Two new documents on the QCA website are <http://www.qca.org.uk/qca15623.aspx> (new SACRE reporting format for annual reports) and <http://www.qca.org.uk/qca15608.aspx> (guidance for agreed syllabus conferences on making effective use of the NSNF).
- The SACRE SEF will move from the Ofsted site to the QCA site later this year.
- The 2008 analysis of SACRE annual reports will focus specifically on the contribution and capacity of SACREs to promote community cohesion.
- As well as the HMI Conference on 20th May 2008, there will be a second event later in 2008, inviting academics in RE to move the pedagogy debate forward.
- The new GCSE RE criteria reflect the NSNF by creating two evenly-balanced outcomes, corresponding to 'learning about' and 'learning from'. Awarding bodies are submitting specification. First teaching cohorts will start in Sept 2009.
- QCA will support the steering and writing groups to draw up proposals to update the RE and SACRE elements of Circular 1/94.

Progress on the RE Strategy: Professor Brian Gates, Chair of the Religious Education Council

REC Strategic Developments include

- Determination to support the RE Action Plan (Jim Knight's talk on website)
- Continuing Re Partnership at national level between DCSF and REC
- Updating guidance on RE in place of 1/94 (RE and SACRES – CW to come)

- Supporting primary and secondary RE teachers. Helping NATRE
- Supporting the effectiveness of local SACRES (roll-out of training)
- Supporting the development of a CPD handbook for RE teachers
- Commissioning an external view of the nature of materials used in RE teaching

The process for developing new guidance will be managed by the REC. The steering and writing groups will be serviced by John Keast (Partnership Adviser) and Sarah Smalley. The steering group will include representatives of different faith groups. The process will start in May-December 2008. Steering and writing will run from January-March 2009 and the guidance will be launched in October 2009.

Young People's Faith Forum Projects:

- **Reports**
 1. Guernsey: The objective was to give young people from Guernsey, where there is very little diversity, experience of other ethnic and religious groups. Year 9 students went to Birmingham and visited different places of worship. The visit was tied in with an art and cultural experience. The young people acted as journalists and recorded the visit electronically.
 2. Hampshire: The focus of this project was pluralism, social and community cohesion, on living together and dealing with difference, not just RE. Schools in Hampshire were twinned with schools in Leicester. It was noticed that some parents in Hampshire withdrew their consent for the mosque visit.
- **Announcement of successful bids for 2008**

Unfortunately the meeting, which was scheduled to end at 3.30pm, ran over time. I left at 3.45pm, so I missed this announcement.