



19<sup>th</sup> century Punjabi painting

# Ealing SACRE: Past, present and future

As we enter the 20<sup>th</sup> year of Ealing SACRE, what is to be our focus? Over the past several years we have revised the syllabus, created a monitoring form for religious education and issued guidance on 'reflection' and on issues that might arise in connection with the increasing number of Muslim pupils in the borough. There is also the new duty on schools to promote social cohesion to consider and the ever-thorny issue of monitoring.

The national curriculum citizenship programme includes a new strand of work—'Identity and diversity: living together in the UK'—which encourages exploration of what it means to be a citizen in this country. Religious education also confronts pupils with the question of identity and the reality of diversity—both in people and in ideas. And Ealing SACRE has been 'graced' with a significant non-religious presence that values the subject at the same time as it wishes that it would become more inclusive. So it will be interesting to see how/whether these two subjects—religious education and citizenship—come together in the future.<sup>1</sup>

In looking to the future it is worth considering the past, and specifically how religious education—and the laws governing it—have changed over the years. The following section does just that. The next section (Ealing SACRE) looks at some of the activities of our SACRE since its inception twenty years ago. For information about the discussion we will be having at the meeting, go to 'churning for social cohesion' on page 6.

## *Historical context<sup>2</sup>*

The inclusion by law of religious education in the curriculum of British state schools is a comparatively recent phenomenon. That said, since many of the earliest schools were owned and run by churches, religious education of a specifically denominational nature was common. As the state began to set up its own board schools<sup>3</sup> the issue of how to deal with the subject was complicated by the fact that churches were fearful that other

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that concern was expressed at the March 1997 SACRE meeting—and at several subsequent meetings—that the teaching of citizenship would squeeze out religious education in an already overcrowded curriculum. Citizenship became a statutory subject in 2002.

<sup>2</sup> The information in this section came from two papers: Gillard D., (1991) *Changing aims—changing content?* (<http://www.dg.dial.pipex.com/articles/educ09.shtml>) and Gillard D., (1992) *Rewriting Oxfordshire's agreed syllabus post 1988* (<http://www.dg.dial.pipex.com/articles/educ13.shtml>)

<sup>3</sup> Schools under the control of locally elected school boards were made possible by the 1870 Education Act.

denominations would use RE in schools to recruit potential members away from their own brands of Christianity. A solution to this problem was a clause in the 1870 Education Act that stated that 'no religious catechism or religious formulary which is distinctive of any particular denomination' was to be taught: it seems that dissension about the details is a perennial problem.

Almost all the school boards or local education authorities of the time issued guidance regarding the content of the religious instruction their schools were required to offer. These 'syllabuses' were usually based on those of the church schools, but with denominational characteristics removed. Even if the board wrote their own, they were often dependent on the help of local clergy. As a result the syllabuses were understandably church-orientated and entirely Christian in content, and dealt almost exclusively with biblical material.

The first significantly different approach is found in the guidance produced in Cambridgeshire in the mid 1920s by an advisory committee whose brief was to draw up an agreed syllabus of religious instruction and observance that would be acceptable to all (Christian) religious bodies. The advisory committee (consisting of head teachers, members of the Anglican and Free Church and academics) that produced the syllabus was a precursor of the Agreed Syllabus Conferences we have today. The Cambridgeshire syllabus proved an enormous success: it was used in some 300 local authorities and inspired others to set up similar committees.

In 1944, a new Education Act specifically spelled out provisions regarding religious education. For instance, the school day should begin with an act of collective worship; all pupils should be given regular religious instruction which (except in aided or special agreement schools) would be according to an agreed syllabus; every local authority was required to make such a syllabus or use that of another authority; an Agreed Syllabus Conference consisting of four panels representing the Church of England, other Christian denominations, the local authority and teachers' organisations was to set the syllabus;<sup>4</sup> parents were given the right to withdraw their children from the act of worship and from religious instruction and teachers were also given this right of withdrawal. Finally, local authorities were given the power to set up a SACRE, although at this time they were not required to do so.

The 1944 act does not specifically mention Christianity as the religion to be taught, however this was taken for granted. It is also clear that in those days spiritual and moral development was considered a prime part of religious education:

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<sup>4</sup> It also stipulated that any one of the panels could veto material considered for inclusion, thus setting up the process for the kind of 'dissent about the details' that dogged the 1999 revision of Ealing's syllabus. Having said that, this particular syllabus was commended by the InterFaith Network and the British Humanist Association as an example of good practice.

“[Children should] gain knowledge of the common Christian faith held by their fathers for nearly 2000 years; seek for themselves in Christianity principles which give a purpose to life and a guide to all its problems; and find inspiration, power and courage to work for their own welfare, for that of their fellow-creatures, and for the growth of God’s kingdom.”<sup>5</sup>

For the next two decades, syllabuses were confessional in nature, with a largely historical content seemingly unrelated to pupils’ lives. But then came the sixties, a decade when increasing immigration was creating a pluralist society at the same time as there was declining interest in organized religion. In education the focus was also shifting, from an authoritative imparting of facts to a more child-centred approach.

“Most teachers in this country shrink from the idea that they should assist in propaganda and indoctrination.” ...“Another way of avoiding...undue pressure is to give all religions a fair hearing.”<sup>6</sup>

As Gilliard points out, this period (from 1960 to the mid-seventies) saw the start of a phenomenological approach to religious education;<sup>7</sup> in addition, rather than encouraging the adoption of a single world view, it was the beginnings of the attempt to help pupils in their own quest for beliefs, values and meaning in life. However, although the aims and philosophy of syllabuses had changed, there was little change in the content, which remained entirely Christian.

From 1974 to 1988 the stated aims and intentions of religious education underwent radical change, during which teachers were no longer asked to turn their pupils into practising Christians. Instead they were encouraged to teach a variety of faiths, and some even went so far as to get their pupils to relate these faiths to their own beliefs. For instance:

“[Religious education should] enable pupils to reflect upon their experience and upon mankind’s quest for and expression of meaning in life.”<sup>8</sup>

“The aim [of this syllabus] is to help young people to achieve a knowledge and understanding of religious insights, beliefs and practices, so that they are able to continue in, or come to, their own beliefs and respect the right of other people to hold beliefs different from their own.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Surrey Agreed Syllabus (1963). It is interesting to note that today, at the same time as religious education is moving away from moral instruction, *all* national curriculum subjects are expected to promote spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

<sup>6</sup> Cornwall Agreed Syllabus (1964).

<sup>7</sup> That is, one in which the object of study is the manifestations of religion, and the forms of religious life, as compared to the dissemination of dogma characteristic of religious instruction.

<sup>8</sup> Lincolnshire Agreed Syllabus (1980).

<sup>9</sup> ILEA (Inner London Education Authority) Agreed Syllabus (1984).

In 1988 the Education Reform Act secured the position of religious education as a compulsory subject, separate from the foundation subjects of the national curriculum. As such, it was immune from the requirements for programmes of study and attainment targets. However fears that pressure from the foundation subjects would result in a diminution of its status—and particularly a reduction in the time allotted for RE—led to many new syllabuses adopting the format of National Curriculum subjects, as well as similar style attainment targets.

The religious landscape of the British Isles in 1944 was such that it was not considered necessary to name Christianity as the religion to be studied. By 1988, the Education Reform Act had to stipulate that teaching was to reflect the mainly Christian nature of British religious traditions, whereas the 1996 Education Act held that an agreed syllabus must reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain were in the main Christian, while taking account of the teachings and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain.

The position taken by QCA in 2004 is that Christianity should be studied throughout each key stage, and that the other principal religions represented in Great Britain—listed as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism—should also be studied. In addition:

“It is also essential that religious education enables pupils to share their own beliefs, viewpoints and ideas without embarrassment or ridicule. Many pupils come from religious backgrounds but others have no attachment to religious beliefs and practices. To ensure that all pupils’ voices are heard and the religious education curriculum is broad and balanced, it is recommended that there are opportunities for pupils to study other religious traditions such as the Bahá’í faith, Jainism and Zoroastrianism and secular philosophies such as humanism.”<sup>10</sup>

Thus, over the 64 years from 1944 to the present, the question of what is legitimate territory to cover has expanded from a single focus on Christianity to include non-religious philosophical points of view. Today, religious education teachers are as likely to be found encouraging a discussion of ‘ultimate questions’ as they are to be putting forth historical and factual aspects of religion. And in Ealing’s latest syllabus (“The marriage of heaven and earth”) we hopefully have a document that has embraced these changes, one that aims to be true to the various traditions while striving to be as inclusive as possible.

### *Ealing SACRE*

Although local authorities were granted the power to establish a SACRE in 1944, they weren’t required to do so until 1988. The first meeting of Ealing SACRE took place in February 1989, with Neil Richardson as Chair. From the minutes of that meeting, other familiar names include Potts and Bagha; it is also interesting to see that from the very

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<sup>10</sup> *Religious education: the non-statutory national framework*, QCA 2004.

beginning there were Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Jewish and Humanist presences on Committee A.<sup>11</sup>

The first Determinations were granted in June 1989 (to Featherstone and Villiers High Schools and Lady Margaret First and Middle Schools); at the following meeting sixteen more applications were considered.<sup>12</sup> In 1990, during the thrashing out of Ealing SACRE's constitution, there was considerable debate concerning the makeup of Committee A, specifically the number of Hindu, Sikh and Muslim representatives that would be allowed; in November of 1991 members of SACRE were informed that the Education Committee had decided to amend the constitution to remove the place reserved for a member of the Ealing Humanist Association.<sup>13</sup>

By 1992, it appears that Ealing had acquired a full-time RE inspector, Roger Butler. In November of that year SACRE discussed a proposed revision to the DfE's guidance on religious education, which would eventually appear as Circular 1/94 (now itself undergoing revision). This year also sees the launch—in the House of Lords, no less—of NASACRE, the National Association of SACRES.

At the meeting in July 1994, Roger Butler suggested that SACRE might monitor RE provision in the borough via the Ofsted inspection reports. This began at the very next meeting, and how we—indeed all SACREs—have come to miss these reports! In his role as specialist RE inspector, Roger took his experience of working in Ealing schools and of serving on SACRE to conferences in Germany and Budapest as part of initiatives to develop multicultural and religious education across Europe.<sup>14</sup>

Following the successful visit of the “Jewish Way of Life” exhibition<sup>15</sup> to Ealing, SACRE would go on to organise five other exhibitions: on Islam (1995), Sikhism (1996), Hinduism (1997), Buddhism (1998), and Christianity (1999). Although there was never a Bahá'í exhibition, the Ealing Bahá'í Association ran for several years a global citizenship project that attracted the participation of several borough schools. In more recent years SACRE

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<sup>11</sup> The unwieldy-named “Groups representing religious denominations other than the Church of England.”

<sup>12</sup> Including one from Acton High School, which was to have its Determination rescinded by the Secretary of State in 1992 following a complaint; not to be deterred, and determined to have a more inclusive approach regardless of the statistical breakdown of the religious affiliation of the student body, Acton High reapplied in 1995 and was again granted a Determination.

<sup>13</sup> It was at this point that the Humanists were invited to nominate a co-opted member. However members of Committee A did not seem keen to welcome their Humanist colleague and at a later meeting, it was resolved *not* to co-opt a Humanist to that committee. Rather it was proposed that the British Humanist Association nominate a representative who could attend meetings and have full speaking rights but no vote. It was in June 2007 that the Humanist representative would be invited to return to full membership of Committee A.

<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that in November 2001 Roger suggested that if short Ofsted reports become the norm, in the term following an inspection, the head or RE-coordinator should be invited to report on RE and collective worship at the school. This is an idea now worth pursuing.

<sup>15</sup> Provided by the Board of Deputies of British Jews.

members have contributed to the creation of an RE module for the Thinking Worlds educational games software.

The tradition of informative presentations to SACRE began in 1995 with a talk on RE in the secondary phase given by a member of the teachers' association committee, and over the years we've been entertained and educated on a number of subjects, ranging from the basics of a variety of religions, the challenges of teaching RE to different age groups, and such topics as the Human Rights Act, religious pluralism and modern monastic life.

SACRE's first guidance to schools on collective worship was disseminated in the academic year 1996-97. Guidance on religious observance and school attendance went out in 2002. SACRE also contributed to the local authority's critical incident manual by revising and updating the chapter entitled "Funeral rites across different cultures." Since 2003, the work of Ealing SACRE has been highlighted on the religious education section of the Ealing Grid for Learning, which includes such features as an illustrated version of the multi-faith pilgrimages in Daniel Favre's book *Glimpses of a Holy City*, an on-line version of the *Days of Observance* calendar, and a 'consult a representative' section, which provides contact details of SACRE members from the various traditions.

Ealing SACRE underwent an inspection by Ofsted in October 2003. Amongst her other findings, HMI Barbara Wintersgill commented that: "There is a strong sense of identity and commitment within [Ealing] SACRE. Members give generously of their time and resources in order to implement SACRE policies." Reading through twenty years' worth of minutes, I can echo that observation. Although there is still work to be done—and finding a way to effectively monitor provision in the borough has to be a priority—it is heartening to see how much has been achieved, and how SACRE has made a strong contribution to the education of Ealing's children.

### *Churning for social cohesion*

In Hindu thought, good and evil, light and darkness, creation and destruction are all considered integral to the dynamic of an evolving universe. This tension of opposites has been mythologized as the battle between the demons (*asuras*) and the gods (*devas*). In Hindu belief it is dharma—i.e. the complex of religious and social obligations—that ensures that a balance between these forces is maintained. However structures of societies evolve, and when this happens it can appear that dharma—or the right way of living—is lost. Another way of looking at this is to say that this is something we all experience when what we hold to be true clashes with the equally cherished beliefs of others: to use a mythic metaphor, at a time like this it might appear as if the demons have seized the moment.

A well-loved Hindu myth speaks of the loss of *amrit* (the cream of the great Milk Ocean) whose absence threatens the very existence of the universe. According to the texts,<sup>16</sup> it is Vishnu, the preserver, who devises a plan to recover the amrit and reactivate the equilibrium by churning the cosmic ocean using the cosmic mountain as the churning stick. Assuming the form of his tortoise avatar, Vishnu supports the mountain on his back, thus preventing it from sinking. He then directs the world serpent to wrap itself around the mountain, depending on the gods and demons to provide the necessary opposing forces in a tug of war to get the job done.

Thus the demons and the gods take opposite ends of the poor cosmic serpent<sup>17</sup> and the churning begins. All manner of marvellous treasures emerge from this process, for example Surabhi, the cow of plenty, and in some versions Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and good fortune. However the disturbance of the cosmic ocean also lets loose a terrible poison which threatens them all, until the god Shiva comes to the rescue. Shiva swallows the poison, but his consort—the quick-thinking Parvati—saves her beloved by throttling him, thus preventing the poison from entering his stomach.

*Team religious vs team atheist: a tug of peace*

Ealing is one of those extremely diverse communities where a confrontation of world-views is all but inevitable. On the whole, we deal with this very well, especially in our schools where the multitude of cultural inheritances is celebrated. And the various faiths represented on Ealing SACRE also (usually!) pull together. So much so that those of us on the non-religious side of the equation have recently felt a ‘them’ versus ‘us’ situation developing.

Which I propose to take as an advantage: for I believe that the next big move for religious education is to become even more inclusive, to be re-defined in a manner that transcends the divide between religious and non-religious beliefs that inspire and sustain us, and motivate us towards justice and right living.

So this evening, as we celebrate 20 years of Ealing SACRE, we will be, once again, undertaking to churn. Neil Richardson, who has been with SACRE from the beginning, is the natural choice to provide the support (i.e. Mt Meru, the tortoise, and even, perchance, the snake): in other words, Neil has graciously agreed to be the moderator of the event.

Unlike many other SACREs, Ealing SACRE has a hearty contingent of people who are not religious but who are nonetheless committed to quality religious education. And tonight we will have two additional members for team atheist: Simon Prebble (primary strategy

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<sup>16</sup> The churning of the ocean of milk (*samudra manthan*) is one of the most famous episodes in the Hindu texts known as *purana* (‘of ancient times’), appearing, with slight variations, in the Srimad Bhagavatam, the Mahabharata and the Vishnu Purana. It is celebrated every twelve years in the festival known as Kumbha Mela.

<sup>17</sup> My empathy for snakes has increased a thousand-fold since the summer school.

manager) and Ali Langston (partnership co-ordinator and officer responsible for helping schools with their duty to promote social cohesion).

The purpose of this 'tug of peace' is to compare experience, to find out what drives and motivates and sustains us as individuals, and how these are different and how these are similar. *There are three simple rules:*

- 1) An individual must speak only of their own experience: they can't hide behind their religion or philosophy. In other words, it is not "we Christians..." or "Humanists believe that..." It has to be about *you*, how your particular belief sustains you, what your experience has been, etc. For example, it might start by one person describing their experience of a divine presence, which might then be 'answered' by a member of team atheist describing their relationship with an internal muse.
- 2) We will **not** be debating the question of the existence/non-existence of God. The two teams are never going to agree on this, and it is not fertile territory for finding common ground.
- 3) We must *all* hold the poison in. It is inevitable in a discussion of this kind that we will step on each other's toes, regardless of whether we intend to or not. Anger will surface, but it must be contained, otherwise we risk losing the amrit.

One of the findings of the inspection of Ealing SACRE by Ofsted in October 2003 was that the membership of SACRE reflected the pattern of religious diversity within the borough but "SACRE as a body has limited opportunities to contribute to the authority's social cohesion agenda." It might not be immediately apparent how this will happen, but in undertaking this exercise I believe that SACRE has a real opportunity to contribute to this agenda.

Nora Leonard  
SACRE consultant  
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