



# The periodical of the Professional Society of Religious Educators

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## EDITORIAL



Welcome to the third issue of *Roots & Wings* for 2016. Again we offer a variety

of articles, newsbytes and resources as an invitation to reflect on classroom practice and to try out new approaches. In this issue, we again have a special focus on RE for special needs with the second part of an article by Anne Krisman and a review of some material from Veritas Publishers in Dublin.

We hope you enjoy the issue.

PAUL FALLER

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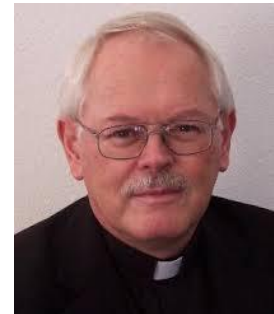
66 Nelson Road, Booyens, Johannesburg 2091  
P O Box 2083 Southdale 2135  
Tel: 011 433 1888  
Web: [www.cie.org.za](http://www.cie.org.za)

# REFLECTION

## The Ten Commandments of Mercy

(Ron Rolheiser)

Among the Ten Commandments, one begins with the word “remember”: *Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day*”. It reminds us to recall something we already know. There are commandments of mercy written into our very DNA. We already know them, but we need to remember them more explicitly. What are they?



### *The Ten Commandments of Mercy:*

#### ***1. Remember that mercy lies deepest in God's heart.***

Few things so much approximate the essence of God as does mercy. Mercy is God's essence. Scripture uses words such as loving-kindness and compassion to try to define what constitutes God's mercy, but the central biblical concept, captured in the Hebrew concept of *hesed*, connotes a relationship that loves, embraces, and forgives even when, and especially when, we cannot measure up or deserve what's given us

#### ***2. Remember that mercy is the essence of all true religion.***

Inside religion and spirituality, within all faiths, three things try to lay claim to what's central: *proper religious practice, outreach to the poor, and compassion*. Ultimately they are not in opposition, but complementary pieces of one religious whole. But for religious practice and outreach to the poor to be an extension of God's love and not of human ego, they need to be predicated upon compassion, mercy. Deepest inside of every religion is the invitation: Be compassionate, merciful, as God is compassionate.

#### ***3. Remember that we all stand forever in need of mercy.***

There is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who converts than over

ninety-nine righteous persons. Does God love sinners more than the righteous? There are no righteous persons. It's rather that we feel God's love more when we admit that we're sinners. None of us ever measure up. But, as St. Paul so consolingly teaches, the whole point is that we don't have to measure up. That's what mercy means. It's undeserved, by definition.

#### ***4. Remember that, having received mercy, we must show mercy to others.***

We only receive and appropriate God's mercy and the mercy of others when we extend that same mercy to others. Mercy has to flow through us. If we don't extend it to others we become self-indulgent and too harsh on others.

#### ***5. Remember that only the practice of mercy sets us free.***

Receiving and giving mercy is the only thing that frees from our congenital propensity to self-seek, self-justify, and judge others. Nothing frees us more from the tyranny of ego than does the practice of mercy.

#### ***6. Remember that mercy is not opposed to justice, but is its fulfillment.***

Mercy, as Walter Kasper so aptly puts it, is not “a kind of fabric softener that undermines the dogmas and

commandments and abrogates the central and fundamental meaning of truth.” That’s the accusation the Pharisees made against Jesus. Mercy is where justice is meant to terminate.

***7. Remember that only the practice of mercy will make God’s Kingdom come.***

Jesus promised us that someday the meek will inherit the earth, the poor will eat plentiful, rich food, and all tears will be wiped away. That can only happen when mercy replaces self-interest.

***8. Remember that mercy needs too to be practiced collectively.***

It is not enough for us to be merciful in our own lives. Mercy is marginalized in a society that doesn’t sufficiently attend to those who are weak or needy, just as it is marginalized in a church that is judgmental. We must create a society that is merciful and a church that is merciful. Mercy, alone, enables the survival of the weakest.

***9. Remember that mercy calls us to do works both spiritual and physical.***

This year, 2016, Pope Francis has asked us all to live a year of mercy, to contemplate the mystery of mercy “as a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace.” Mercy, he believes, is the secret to putting a credible face to God, to putting a credible face to our churches, and to walking with steadiness inside our own lives.

Our Christian faith challenges us to perform mercy in a double way, corporeally and spiritually. The classic corporal works of mercy are: *Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, shelter the homeless, cloth the naked, visit the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead.* The classic spiritual works of mercy are: *instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful, comfort the afflicted, admonish the sinner, forgive offenses, bear wrongs patiently, and pray for the living and the dead.* God has given us different gifts and all of us are better at some of these than at others, but mercy is manifest in all of them.

***10. Remember that our lives are a dialogue between God’s mercy and our weaknesses.***

The only thing at which we are adequate is being inadequate. We are forever falling short at something, no matter the strength of our sincerity, good intention, and willpower. Only mercy, receiving it and giving it, can lead us out of the choppy waters of our own anxieties, worry, and joylessness. Only in knowing mercy do we know gratitude.

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## REFLECTION

### Youth Today – Who Are They Really?

(Ron Rolheiser)

A seminarian I know recently went to a party on a Friday evening at a local university campus. The group was a crowd of young, college students and when he was introduced as a seminarian,

as someone who was trying to become a priest and who had taken a vow of celibacy, the mention of celibacy evoked some giggles in the room, some banter, and a number of jokes about how much

he must be missing out on in life. Poor, naïve fellow! Initially, within this group of millennials, his religious beliefs and what this had led to in his life was regarded as something between amusing and pitiful. But, before the evening was out, several young women had come, cried on his shoulder, and shared about their frustration with their boyfriends' inability to commit fully to their relationship.

## YOUTH *today*

This incident might serve as a parable describing today's young people in our secularized world. They exhibit what might aptly be called a bi-polar character about faith, church, family, sexual ethos, and many other things that are important to them.

They present an inconsistent picture: On the one hand, by and large, they are not going to church, at least with any regularity; they are not following the Christian ethos on sexuality; they seem indifferent to and even sometimes hostile to many cherished religious traditions; and they can appear unbelievably shallow in their addiction and enslavement to what's trending in the world of entertainment, fashion, and information technology. Looked at from one perspective, our kids today can appear irreligious, morally blasé, and on a heavy diet of the kind of superficiality that characterizes reality television and video

games. More seriously still, they can also appear myopic, greedy, pampered, and excessively self-interested. Not a pretty picture.

But this isn't exactly the picture. Beneath that surface, in most cases, you will find someone who is very-likeable, sincere, soft, good-hearted, gracious, moral, warm, generous, and searching for all the right things (without much help from a culture that lacks clear moral guidance and is fraught with over-choice). The good news is that most young people, at the level of their real desires, are not at odds at all with God, faith, church, and family. For the most part, youth today are still very good people and want all the right things.

But, that isn't always so evident. Sometimes their surface seems to trump their depth so that who they really are and what they really want is not so evident. We see the surface and, seen there, our youth can appear more self-interested than generous, more shallow than deep, more blasé than morally sensitive, and more religiously indifferent than faith-filled. They can also manifest a smugness and self-sufficiency that suggests little vulnerability and no need for guidance from anyone beyond themselves.

Hence their bi-polarity: Mostly they want all the right things, but, too often, because of a lack of genuine guidance and their addiction to the culture, they aren't making the kinds of choices that will bring them what they more-deeply desire. Sexuality is a prime example here: Studies done on millennials indicate that most of them want, at the end of the day, to be inside a monogamous, faithful marriage. The problem is that they also believe that they can first allow themselves ten to fifteen years of sexual promiscuity, without having to accept that practicing ten to fifteen years of infidelity is not a good preparation for the kind of fidelity needed to sustain marriage and family.

In this, as in many other things, they are caught between their cultural ethos and their own fragile securities. The culture trumpets a certain ethos, liberation from the timidities of the past, complete with a smugness that belittles whatever questions it. But much of that smugness is actually whistling in the dark. Deep down, our youth are pretty insecure and, happily, this keeps them vulnerable and likeable.

Maybe Louis Dupre, the retired philosopher who taught for some many years at Yale, captures it best when he says that today's young people are not bad, *they're just not finished*. That's a simple insight that captures a lot. Someone can be wonderful and very likeable, but still immature. Moreover, if you're young enough, that can even be attractive, the very definition of cool. The reverse is also, often times, true: More than a few of us, adults, suffer from our own bi-polarity: we are mature, but far from wonderful and likeable. This makes for some strange, paradoxical binaries.



So who is the actual young person of today? Is it the person who is wrapped up in his or her own world, obsessive about physical appearance, addicted to social media, living outside marriage with his or her partner, smug in his or her own non-traditional moral and religious views? That, I believe, is the surface appearance. The actual young person of today is warm, good-hearted, generous, and waiting, waiting consciously for love and affirmation, and waiting unconsciously for God's embrace.

## REFLECTION

### What is RE for?

(NATRE)



The following statement cards can be used in a variety of ways to stimulate discussion about the role and purpose of RE in the curriculum. Blank cards can be used to add the group's own statements.

Copy, cut up and use the following statements to stimulate discussion in one of the following ways:

- Ask groups to sort these statements, putting the ones they feel are most important at the top and those they feel are less important lower down. They should add any of their own statements on the blank cards. Compare outcomes with the aims of RE in the Agreed Syllabus or faith community guidelines. Draw up an agreed statement about the value and contribution of RE in your school.
- Ask groups to pick out 2-3 statements which members agree are the most essential elements of good RE. Identify how these are provided in your school. Identify any aspects which need to be improved.

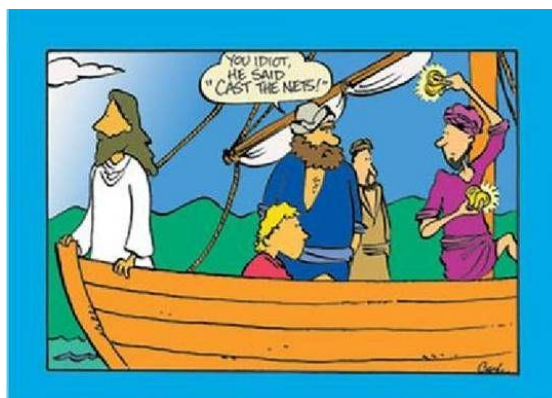


- Pick and explain: place the cards face up, in turn each person picks one card, reads it out and suggests an example of what this might mean in practice in RE. Others add their own suggestions. Note any questions which need further explanation. Take back for whole group discussion.

### Good RE...

provides pupils with a chance to think about their own experiences of life, in the light of the insights from religion and belief	is imaginative, engaging, creative, challenging, relevant and fun	develops confidence and thoughtfulness about pupils' own beliefs
makes a significant contribution to whole-school aims, and to pupils' personal, spiritual and moral development	is an essential part of the school curriculum, equivalent to national curriculum subjects, but with a syllabus that is 'agreed' locally	is not limited to exploring religious belief but includes secular philosophies such as humanism
is open and inclusive of all	provides space to explore pupils' own beliefs and values	enables pupils to spend some time building up understanding of different world religions and beliefs
encourages respect and understanding of other people	is not about teaching pupils to be religious but values the beliefs of those with a faith and those with none	

## HUMOUR



## WEBSITE

### Jubilee of Mercy

<http://www.iubilaeummisericordiae.va/content/gdm/en.html>

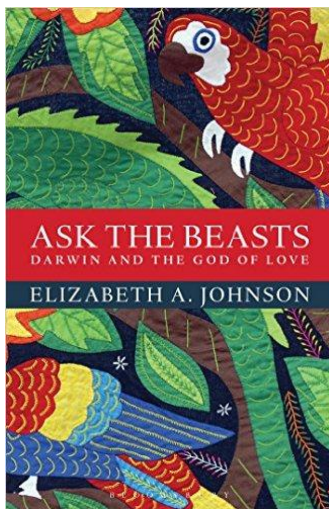


Explore this website for information and resources pertaining to the Holy Year of Mercy.

## BOOK REVIEW

### Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love

(Elizabeth Johnson. 2014. London: Bloomsbury, 323 pp., ISBN 978 1 4729 0373 0)



For millennia plant and animal species have received little sustained attention as subjects of Christian theology and ethics in their own right. Focused on the human dilemma of sin and redemptive grace, theology has considered the doctrine of creation to be mainly an overture to the main drama of human being's relationship to God. What value does the natural world have within the framework of religious belief? The crisis of biodiversity in our day, when species are going extinct at more than 1,000 times the natural rate, renders this question acutely important. Standard perspectives need to be realigned; theology needs to look out of the window, so to speak as well as in the mirror. *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* leads to the conclusion that love of the natural world is an intrinsic element of faith in God and that far from being an add-on, ecological care is at the centre of moral life. (See the article "Elizabeth Johnson explores human kinship with God's creation" on Page 20.)

# ARTICLE

## Speak from the Heart: Exploring and Responding to RE in the Special School (Part 2)

(Anne Krisman) (This paper is continued from Vol 2 No 2)

*'He comes to the thought of those who know him beyond thought, not to those who imagine He can be attained by thought; He is unknown to the learned and known to the simple.'* (Kena Upanishad.)

*In essence the religious outlook is that knowledge and understanding have a conversive or life-transforming quality, and, that in the end they yield pride of place to holiness. And although holiness often seems to embrace a supreme kind of wisdom, you do not have to be clever to be holy.* (Dennis Starkings, 1993, 135.)

### Struggle

Kenneth Hyde offers an interesting insight into special needs pupils, in his text based on research on religion and 'slow learners'. He describes how one 'immature and insecure' boy, given a test on New Testament knowledge, only shines in work based on the crucifixion. The exceptional result is considered to be 'due to special motivation' as his experience found an echo in the 'ostracism and persecution' suffered by Jesus (1969, 51-52).

This example also reflects my experience of pupils with learning difficulties and their response to RE. They also carry within them the experience of struggle, bereavement and the sense of being different. This will have a profound influence on the way in which they understand religious themes. Tony Charlton has written about the special needs child who 'drags a damaged self' around the school, 'convinced of his/her own inadequacy, incompetency and inability' (1992, 31). The special school is a community of individuals who have medical problems, have had life-threatening operations, who are trying to deal with bereavement and loss in the family. Erica Musty has spoken of the 'despairing sadness' of children who suffer in silence after a death in the family (1989, 14). Many pupils in special school have been hindered in their education through the experience of trauma.

Special school pupils are confronted each day with the frustration of learning and the belief that they are inadequate and have failed. Some feel an acute sense, promoted by their parents, that they will only be achievers when they 'make it to mainstream.' These feelings often rise to the surface in school, through tears or anger. There is also a shared understanding within the special school, and pupils are aware of their friends' pain and difficulties. They often support each other through the 'bad days.' Their history of difficulty leads them into a relationship with themes in RE that deal with suffering, the reality of life and death, and the triumph of love. While these themes may generally be considered difficult, for pupils in a special school they are familiar, for they link with their own experience.

Pupils' comments in RE discussions reflect how their individual experience has an impact on their religious understanding. Harry, a Year 10 pupil, is from a mixed Christian and Jewish background. He has had a major operation and has seen several of his hospital friends die since. Some of my records of Harry's key comments in RE, listed over a three month period, reflect his concern about life and the impact this has on his understanding of religion. Harry talks about how the family is the most important thing in life,

- "Books can't talk to you or love you."
- He says that someone who has died "lives inside you."



- On the theme of poverty, he says that "A poor family might ask, why is life doing this to us? But I accept it's how life is."
- He says, "It's wrong to kill animals. It's still destroying life."
- He says that parents provide "an outer shell of life" for their children.
- He talks about whether prayer works and says that it may "give a bit extra" but that "You cannot mix medical matters and religion - it's mixing religion and science."

Harry is drawn to Buddhism, seeing Buddhists as 'calm people'. He also has an affinity with its theme of suffering. This interest contradicts many who would see Buddhism as too difficult for pupils with learning difficulties to understand. His understanding of the precious but fragile nature of life leads to an awareness of key themes in religion.

Mainstream pupils may be able to read about religious figures who renounce wealth for spiritual gain, but these messages might be contradicted as soon as they reach their Business Studies lesson. Harry has a deep belief, based on his experience of ill-health, in the importance of family and love beyond wealth. When asked to list his needs in life, he wrote 'Parents who love you', 'a home' and 'warmth.' He says, with conviction, "If I win the lottery, I would give half to the Royal Free and half to Great Ormond Street Hospital...because they have done so much for me in my past and in my future."

Dennis Starkings, in introducing an essay by Clive Erricker, remarks that, 'When we try to take hold of religious insights and ideas, we try to build them into a story of our own lives' (1993, 136). My special school pupils begin by overlaying their history, language and understanding onto religious themes. This is made clear in their response to the parable of the Prodigal Son. A father, who has two sons, divides his property between them. The younger son goes away and squanders his wealth, while the older son stays at home. The younger son returns home, ashamed and feeling no longer worthy to be his father's son. Yet his father forgives him, and orders a celebration, explaining to the angry older son that 'this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found' (Luke 15: 11 - 31). I used this parable with a group of Year 9 pupils and asked them to list what was 'lost' in the story. This was their list:

- lost love
- lost privileges
- lost mother's spirit
- soul is lost
- love from the mother
- father's relationship with the sons
- money and the future
- the eldest son feels he has lost his father's love

It was clear that for some pupils, the absence of a mother in the story was significant. They interpreted the story as being about bereavement or divorce, reading their experience of loss and pain into the text. When asked for the most important person in the story, one pupil stated, "It's the mother, because she has died and has left her spirit in the heart of her sons." One girl renamed the parable 'The Hard Family.' When asked why, she focused on the father as a single parent, explaining:

*The dad ain't got a wife, he's only got two children. He cares about them, he wants to know where they are and what they're doing. He can't just say, 'You go where you want.' That was probably why he was upset when the younger one went, and now he's come back, he wants a party.*

To return to an example at the beginning of my study, this reading of the Prodigal Son could be seen as evidence of pupils' immature thinking and lack of readiness for religion, as they are failing to see the importance of the father as a symbol and are concentrating

on the absence of the mother. However, their list reveals an understanding of the main themes, and they are engaging with the idea of what it is to be lost and the importance of love. They have brought themselves into the story.

### Caring about the individual

There is a vocabulary in the special school which stresses the worth of the individual. These words include 'personal targets', 'small steps forward', 'progress' and 'achievement'. The environment is cushioned against competition and success in league tables. As a result, pupils in the special school see each other as individuals with distinct difficulties, and develop an understanding of each other. The arrival of a boy with Down Syndrome in the classroom led his classmates, who realised that they were more able than him, to consider how they could best help him. A pupil who helped him colour in a worksheet was criticised by others. "He has to have his freedom to learn, he won't improve his independence," said one boy, playing back teacher language.

This awareness of individual difference and difficulties will have an impact on pupils' understanding of RE. They are drawn towards religious themes that deal with individuals' struggle. This is illustrated in the themes that are most successful with special school pupils; the life of St. Francis, Bernadette, events leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus, the story of Ruth, Martin Luther King. The life stories that touch the pupils most deeply have an echo in their own lives. There is a link here in the use of the 'analogous experience' reflected in the materials of the Warwick RE Project (Jackson, 1997, Chapter 5).

They are fascinated by St. Francis' relationship with God, after the serious illness that changed his life, and they empathise with Bernadette's difficulties in learning her catechism, after she misses schooling because of asthma. They are touched by the devotion of Ruth to her mother-in-law after her husband dies. These links can produce a quality of learning beyond the normal expectation for special school RE. A group of Year 11 pupils, fascinated and moved by the story of Jesus' life, were able to consider passages from Luke and look for evidence which showed why the crucifixion happened. All that was needed was the text to be read to them; they were able to give mature insights because of their empathy and desire to know. Jerome Bruner's work is relevant here; his view is that 'we begin where the learner is, and we create interest in a subject by rendering it 'worth knowing' (1977, 31). Our pupils need to see the direct relevance of RE to their lives, and look for connections in their own experience. Their personal and distinctive interpretations should not be undervalued, giving them a shape for understanding wider concepts. One Year 10 pupil, after watching a video of the Exodus, responded strongly to the cartoon images of the Egyptian horses falling in the Red Sea. He asked, "Was Moses a good man or a bad man?" His concern for the welfare of animals, which touched him deeply, led him to an evaluation of the qualities of a religious leader.

### Interpreting religion

Robert Jackson has argued that a fundamental aim of RE is 'to develop an understanding of the grammar - the language and symbolic patterns of religions and the interpretive skills necessary to gain that understanding' (1997). He also argues that, rather than setting aside their own presuppositions, the pupils should make use of previous knowledge and experience in making comparisons with the views being studied. Moreover, he sees RE as 'two-way'; the pupils' knowledge and insight contribute to new understanding; the understanding of something new might 'edify' the student. (1997, Chapters 5 and 6). In what way is this relevant for pupils in a special school?

We have seen that special school pupils have an understanding of themselves and their difficulties. They are drawn to the lives of religious figures that have an echo in their experience. They are therefore more interested in the way in which individuals practise

religion, than in a list of facts about faiths. The interpretive approach, described in the work of Robert Jackson and the Warwick RE Project, therefore fits their world view. Special school pupils will have a sensitivity towards the 'organic, personal and changing' nature of religion, because they are fascinated with the way in which real people lead their lives (Jackson, 1997, 47).

This is indicated in the way in which a Year 11 group listened to a Jewish classmate talk about his plans to go into catering as a career. He explained how he would have to taste non-kosher food as part of the job, but that he would still keep kosher at home. This example of the way in which believers have to compromise their religion to fit into the modern world, would not have been reflected in a text book, which would offer a rigid definition of kashrut. The special school pupils' lack of literacy skills can offer a liberation from the text-book image of religion. There is a commonly heard complaint that school RE text books, with a high reading age, are inappropriate for pupils in secondary special schools, and that this affects the quality of provision for the subject. However, this gives an impression that knowledge about religion is communicated solely through text books. The fixed and often dated image of a religion in a text book may create less understanding than a class member talking about what Islam means to her, a photograph of someone taking communion or the stimulus of a video which shows Hindu worship. Pupils' lack of literacy skills can offer the opportunity to convey the meaning of religion in more flexible and creative ways, instead of tired and limited activities which concentrate on lists about faiths (see Jackson, 1997, Chapters 3 and 6 on the relationship between parts and wholes).

This interpretive approach can also be seen in the distinctive work produced by pupils in the special school and in their discussions about religion and human experience. Pandit, a devotee of Sathya Sai Baba, produced this poem in Year 9. Pandit has speech and communication problems and limited literacy skills. However, the outcome revealed an understanding of St Francis' love of God and the natural world, as well as being suffused with Poonit's Hindu beliefs.

Pandit was given a cloze procedure shell to complete the poem, and it was read to him by a special support assistant. His instant responses were recorded (shown in bold text below) and then developed into a poem. Although there could be a conventional way of completing the poem (e.g. 'My brother is the wolf' from the story of the wolf of Gubbio) Pandit's personal interpretation shone through, drawing on his own religious identity and understanding.

### ST FRANCIS

*My sister is the Earth  
I love the tree because it is nice  
I love the rain because it is beautiful, because there is no rain in the sun  
I am St Francis, I live in the monk's house  
My brother is the brother cow, elephant  
God speaks to me and says "I love you. I love your moon."  
My special message to the world is to be kind to everyone and every living thing.*

This poem, which was extraordinary work for Pandit, showed a resonance between his strong religious identity and the life of St Francis. He was excited when he learnt how St Francis addressed people and the natural world as 'Brother' and 'Sister', as he was used to addressing fellow devotees in this way. Pandit initially tried playing with language and ideas, exclaiming, "Brother Daddy and Sister Mummy!" In the final poem, he has linked images from Hinduism, the cow and elephant, with the term 'Brother.'

The idea of special school pupils as interpreters of religious experience is further reflected in pupils' responses after visiting a friary. Jeremy was asked how he felt as a Jewish boy during the visit. He said, with humour, "I felt like a friar, but a Jewish friar!" He was aware he was an outsider looking in, but was able to bring his religious identity into play in a new context (Jackson, 1997). This was also illustrated by a discussion he had with a classmate after the trip. Angela is a member of the Church of Latter Day Saints. Both Angela and Jeremy were fascinated by a model of a skull in the chapel, and this led to a long discussion about the significance and appropriateness of bringing an image of death into a holy building.

ANGELA: I was surprised to see a skull there. I really love skulls, but in a church?....

JEREMY: There was a statue of a person with a Bible in their hand and then a skull next to their feet, well, that's unusual.

ANGELA: Well, you're right, but the friar said that's a symbol of being dead and to have a skull by you to show that people die or something. And that lady who was buried in the church.....

JEREMY: Yes, she should be buried in a grave or a garden or something.

ANGELA: In the garden, but not in a church.

JEREMY: It's not the right thing to do.

ANGELA: You want to be holy, but not by being buried in a church....I'm not being a hypocrite or anything.

JEREMY: If a Jewish person was buried they wouldn't bury them in the synagogue, they'd bury them in a Jewish cemetery.

ANGELA: That's a place for God.....you should have some respect. If the friars have a garden they should bury them there. If I was that lady, I would like to be cremated and then put in a jar and then I can be put in the church, but the whole body in a church, that's kind of weird.

Jeremy's comments appeared to be influenced by a perception of what was 'kosher' or 'fit and proper' for a religious building. He brought his Jewish understanding into his emphasis on a sense of separation, between what was right for inside a holy building and what should be outside. He perceived death as only appropriate for 'outside,' whereas Angela viewed cremation as the way of purifying the body to make it able to be received into a holy place. The pupils were bringing both a personal and religious understanding to the discussion. The mystery of the skull led them to engage with the symbolic and to involve themselves in a discussion about values and beliefs.

Children in a special school will often have difficulties in coping with a mass of information. However, this will lead them to draw heavily on their inner resources, and to use the messages from their own lives to understand religion. This emphasis on knowledge coming from within, will often lead to them developing a questioning approach and a philosophy of life. One Year 11 pupil, unsure of how he felt about his own Christian background, often used RE lessons to explore questions of personal religious identity. "How do you know you're Jewish when you're born?" he asked me. He also asked a Muslim classmate, "Do you ever wake up in the morning and feel you don't want to be Muslim?"

Therefore, the special school child's sensitivity to feelings, which leads to an engagement with the meaning of symbols for individuals, can promote a deeper understanding of religious tradition than a dry historical overview or an over-emphasis on facts and information. A class will be able to respond immediately to the question of why the Guru



Granth Sahib (Sikh holy book) is held above the head when transported, suggesting closeness to God or Heaven, as well as issues to do with respect and cleanliness.

When I heard Abdur, a Year 7 pupil, and his father were going to Makkah, I asked his father if he could bring back a prayer mat. Abdur's father died on the trip, and when his son returned, clutching the mat close to him, the whole class each wanted to find a special place for it in the RE room. Some thought it deserved a place on its own, others tried placing it next to the Islamic artefacts on the shelves or putting it beside a velvet picture of the Ka'aba. One boy said, "It should be on the ceiling because it is closer to God." Here were children showing an understanding of the 'wider symbolic patterns' of religions (Jackson, 1997), an understanding that had been sparked by love, respect and concern for their bereaved classmate.

### Pupils' Language and RE

"The heart is happy to learn about other religions." Jeremy

"A person's spirit is like air, but the body rots away." Harry

"A soul is part of remembering what you are." Rashpal

Where does the distinctive vocabulary of my pupils come from? In searching for words to describe their experiences, they use a palette of concepts which seem to reflect their needs, and the words 'heart', 'soul', 'spirit', 'love' are used with meaning and power.

After hearing the story of Guru Nanak, who accepts a meal from a poor carpenter, Lalo, but rejects the rich merchant's feast, Kathleen said, "The rich man had a heart of gold but the poor man had a heart of God." In another story from the Sikh tradition, a rich merchant is presented with a needle by the Guru, to give back to him when he meets him in Heaven. Immediately the pupils' discussion moved into the language they felt secure with. "You can't take money to Heaven, but you can take your soul," remarked one boy.

John Hull has described conversations with his 5 year old son, where the child talks about his 'invisible friends,' Mary, Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit. When asked by his father who told him about these 'friends', the child replies, "My heart told me that....my brain told me that." John Hull concludes that it is possible that his son gained the idea of the 'heart as a locus for religious devotion' from the Catholic school he attended (1991, 20 - 21).

However, while my classroom contains pupils who have come from a faith community, there are many who do not, yet these words are still used by them. It seems unlikely that this language has just been imported into the room from pupils from religious communities and is used without awareness. It is simply the case that this language seems appropriate to use in certain contexts, when the concepts are deep and searching and where everyday words seem to fail. The word 'heart', often accompanied by a gesture of touching the heart, is commonly used by pupils to denote insight and the awareness of an inner life. As Jeremy said about himself, "It's in my heart...the heart is happy to learn about other religions...instead of being Jewish all the time."

The use of a spiritual vocabulary, when many pupils have language and communication difficulties, is significant and should be affirmed. John Hull, a Christian believer, has spoken of the importance of pupils acquiring a vocabulary 'which will enable them to talk about God and the issues of human life which God-talk entails.' He underlines the importance, not of developing doctrine but of 'enriching children's vocabulary, and through conversation, developing images and concepts which will enable children to grapple, at their own level, with the issues and experiences involved in God-talk' (1991, 4). It is interesting that Pandit, the devotee of Sai Baba, despite his severe difficulties with speech and communication and his usual struggles in constructing a simple sentence, chose to respond to the question, "What about RE makes you happy?" by giving a wider reaching response. "This organisation makes us happy and when we it makes us happy, it

makes us proud that we have done some work." He continued, "RE is a study that we can give to God to see us."

The enrichment and affirmation of a spiritual vocabulary can be promoted by drawing on the pupils' own vocabulary within teaching RE texts. When I told the story of the woman who comes to the Buddha with her dead baby in her arms, asking him to bring the child back to life, I chose relevant words that had been used by the pupils and therefore had a significance for them, "A woman came to the Buddha and asked him with all her heart and soul to bring her baby back to life again."

It is significant that this seemed to heighten pupils' empathy with the mother's plight and, in turn, sparked a similar, symbolic vocabulary. One girl remarked, following a role-play based on the theme, "the mother feels like part of her heart has gone; it is like having a hole in the heart." Another girl commented, "I felt like crying in the story, it is because you brought out the truth." The engagement with the mother's experience, through the nature of the language used, enabled a deeper understanding of the wider meaning of the story - the acceptance of death and the nature of suffering.

The language of special school pupils differs from the language used in mainstream RE classrooms. It reflects a deep personal response, and a profound spirituality. I try to give status and recognition to pupils' responses by using a 'Wall of Wisdom' where pupils' comments are recorded in speech bubbles for all to read. Kathleen's observation, "Don't judge a book by its cover, don't judge a face by its colour" or Darren's words on racism, "You can get up from being beaten up, but you can't get up from hurt in your heart" are typical of the comments displayed on the wall.

The Wall of Wisdom can also be used to record a development in understanding, with Stuart moving from the statement, "God is like a babysitter, he never leaves you alone," to his later reflection on seeing an image of Krishna as a baby, "How can God babysit himself?" The use of a display of profound comments and questions encourages pupils to see themselves as part of a construction of understanding in RE. They are learning that religion has a special vocabulary and uses language in a particular way. They also grasp that religion has a particular area of concern and that religious wisdom is not just for experts. The pupils are active participants in its world.

### Creative teaching

If the 'small step' approach is not adequate for pupils with moderate learning difficulties, then how do we approach the teaching of RE in a special school? I have explained how my pupils feel comfortable with a spiritual vocabulary, and how their experience leads them to engage with searching issues. I feel it is important to devise teaching strategies that enhance and build upon their distinctive understanding.

I have found that a new theme can be introduced, not by a small step, but by a powerful question that immediately engages the imagination. I call this the 'burning core' as it leads to a source of energy that will carry a theme through to its conclusion. Work on Moses began with the question 'What makes a mother give up her baby?' and this was linked with a story in the local newspaper about a girl who had abandoned her new-born baby in a public toilet. Pupils are encouraged to generate ideas or theories - in this case, several children felt the mother was 'stressed' which led to her action. This kernel leads into work on the Bible story.

An introduction to work on Bernadette of Lourdes considered 'If the Queen came to our area, who would she want to speak to?' After listing a mixture of important local people, ordinary school children and others, we considered, 'If God appeared, who would He want to speak to?' Although most children in the class thought he would want to speak to the

poor and needy, one boy explained that he thought even rich people had the need to communicate with God at some time in their lives.

This approach is central to the Redbridge Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education, which states that 'raising questions of a certain kind and quality is fundamental to the nature of the subject' (1995). A question-based beginning to a theme, which goes to the essence, can clarify any confusions, develop a group understanding, and bring out any distinctive readings pupils have. A theme on the Western Wall and pilgrimage began with the question, 'What makes a wall holy?' and pupils were encouraged to talk about whether the classroom wall could be holy. Most mentioned that the wall in the classroom had a wastepaper bin by it, which gave an indication that it was not sufficiently special or respected.

When they looked at photographs of people by the Western Wall and the notes posted in the cracks, there was a common perception that 'it must be holy because someone has died there and left their spirit in the wall.' Pupils were interested in the past and how it affected religious people, but not in the sense of a dry history of dates and events. Their responses were similar to the perception of a visitor to the Wall, drawn towards it because of a sense of awe and holiness, rather than for solely architectural or historical reasons. This led to drama work based on Chassidic legends about the Western Wall, which tell why only one wall remains of the Holy Temple. One tale tells of Israel joining together to build the temple walls, but how the rich and powerful can afford to pay others to do the work. Only the Western Wall, built by the poor, remains, protected by the wings of an angel in times of war.

### The arts

For special school pupils, the arts are a way of engaging with the symbolic and a powerful force for expression. Pupils can develop their own distinctive creative responses to religion, stimulated by a classroom environment that contains a wide range of images and texts from the world faiths. This is reflected in the diversity of my special needs pupils, who have found their own niche in creative expression within RE.

A Muslim pupil, hearing impaired and sometimes distanced from the class, gains pleasure from religious calligraphy, beginning with Quranic verses but moving to the Upanishads and Hebrew texts. An autistic girl, often silent in lessons, draws detailed pictures of holy buildings in Jerusalem. Clive, a classical music lover, loves the immersive sound of a Buddhist peace music tape, and tries to meditate. He explains, "I like this music because it makes me feel like I'm human." Angela is drawn to a postcard of a Japanese temple at sunset, copying it in pastels. She says, "This is the last place I would like to see before I die." In the special school, the arts are a way of developing the individual's inner perception. When conventional forms of communication fail, the arts provide a voice.

A key to developing the creative arts within RE is by observing and listening to the pupils themselves. When discussing the types of activity that happened in a church, some gestured as they talked. One boy said 'praying' and put his hands together, another said, 'reading from the Bible' and made the sign of an open book. Although we were talking about Christian prayer, a Hindu girl with severe speech and communication difficulties, suddenly made a link with her own experience and bowed her head down on the floor, in a gesture from her own faith. The pupils' instinctive move into the symbolic was then developed into a dance piece, with pupils turning and showing their movements to the music of Mozart.

It is significant that the most luminous art work will be after listening to stories that have a strong emotional power for our pupils. The story of the first Revelation to the prophet Muhammad, for example, is special because of Muhammad's response to the angel Jibril, who shows him the burning words of the Quran - "I cannot read." When the class hears this

part of the story, they lean forward in their seats, seeing a point of contact with their own difficulty in reading.

The classroom task - to represent the moment of the Revelation in art work, by showing the holiness but not by showing Allah, Muhammad or the angel - may seem abstract or too demanding. However, transfixed by the story, the pupils work with inspiration, using gold paper, glitter, Arabic words or the use of light, to show the divine. Some children represent Allah's presence by showing a light from the sky, for others, the whole mountain at Hira is covered with sparkle. Some choose to emphasise the light emanating from the cave. Each art work shows an individual response to the transcendent.

The use of Guru Nanak's prayers as an activity has revealed an understanding of the way Sikhs perceive God, as well as a creative response to an area that would otherwise be difficult to express. Year 10 pupils were given a cloze passage of the Guru's prayers, with key words missed out. They then completed the text. This activity came after work on Guru Nanak's life and teachings. Lee-ann's responses are in bold:

*You O God, are in the water, you are in the dry land,  
You are in the river, you are in the sea,  
You are in the sky, you are in the jungle,  
You are in the fire, you are in the sea.  
Only you are in the night.*

The activity has enabled Lee-ann, despite limited literacy skills, to grapple with ideas of the transcendent, and to glimpse the meaning of God to religious believers. There is both a simplicity and a profundity in her responses. This illustrates a way in which pupils with learning difficulties, despite problems with literacy, can be enabled to engage with their poetic imagination and to grasp what is beyond the immediate.

### Conclusion

We were beginning a theme on Pilgrimage. I asked my Year 8 RE class, "What journeys do we make in life?" I had expected answers to be close to home; going to auntie's house, going to the shops, coming to school by coach. I even had some travel brochures to cut up, because we were talking about journeys. But their first responses were surprising:

- The journey between life and death
- The journey that the soul makes out of the body
- The journey between being asleep and being awake

When I asked Rashpal to explain what 'soul' meant, she said, "A soul is a way of remembering what you are." Stuart asked, "Does the soul miss the body when it leaves it?" It was a lesson where pupils made inspirational leaps, but it was not an isolated event. The brochures, scissors and glue were put away, and we began to talk about life and death, and Joyce's trip to Lourdes after her father had died, and Stuart's mother, "I like to think of her as a ghost, because that's all I have left of her..."

In this study I have made the case for a form of RE that reflects the experiences of pupils in the special school. I have shown the way in which children with learning difficulties bring their understanding and interpretation into the study of RE, and the influence this has on their language, spiritual insight and creative work. My hope is that this work will help to raise the status of RE in the special school, and also raise questions about the quality and appropriateness of RE provided when some of these pupils transfer into mainstream provision.

My approach has been deeply affected by my Jewish background, which has shaped my responses to those who are perceived as being outside of society. Each year, at Rosh



Hashanah, we hear this portion read in synagogue, and it always has a resonance for me, holding up a mirror to my experience of teaching RE in the special school:

The entire people assembled in the square before the Water Gate and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the scroll of the Teaching of Moses which the Lord had given Israel...

Ezra read from the scroll of the Teaching of God, translating it and giving the sense; so that they understood the meaning....

Nechemiah, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites, who were explaining to the people said, "This day is holy to the Lord your God, you must not mourn or weep, as people were weeping as they listened to the words of the Teaching.. (Nechemiah 8: 8-10).

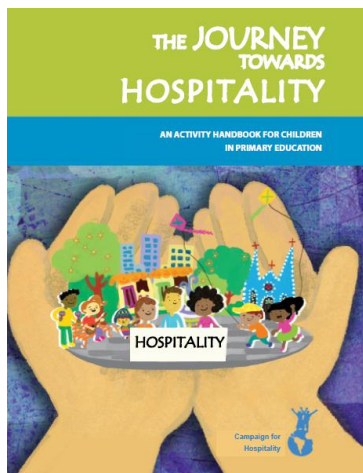
In the same way as the Children of Israel understood the Torah, because it was part of their history and struggle, because the stories were powerful, and because it was explained in words they could understand, then the teacher can communicate a dynamic form of RE to pupils with learning difficulties, an RE that acknowledges their distinct experiences, that welcomes their way of thinking, that values their artistic expression; an RE of the heart.

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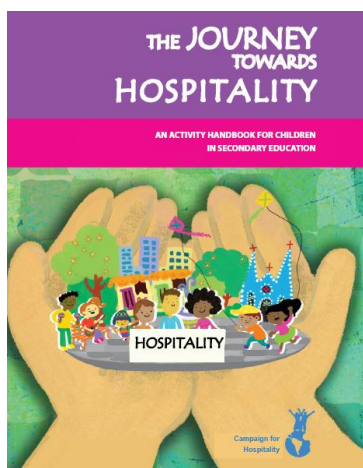
# THE JOURNEY TOWARDS HOSPITALITY

## *Introduction: Why is hospitality important?*



There are currently more than 230 million people in the world who live outside their countries of origin. They are on the move, or have been so at some point in their lives. They could have been forced to move for a variety of reasons, ranging from adverse economic conditions to the search for new sources of income for their families, conflicts, political violence, gangs or natural disasters.

Leaving our homeland is not easy: it implies breaking up with our friends and daily relationships, abandoning places and habits we love, and which are familiar to us, and embarking on a journey towards the unknown, looking for a new place where we can settle down, grow up and live with dignity, a place with which we can identify. This process involves a great personal, community and social transformation.



- Do we know the reality of people who are forced to move, their aspirations, difficulties and needs?
- Do we know if their rights are respected in our communities?
- Do we realise how these people enrich our societies?
- How can we get to know them better and welcome one another?

The activity handbooks illustrated here are part of a Campaign for Hospitality organised by the Jesuit Network for Migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean (RJM LAC) with other sponsor organisations. The aim of the campaign and of this activity handbook is to enable children and young people

to:

- Acknowledge the reality of migrants, refugees and forcibly displaced people.
- Discover the richness of cultural diversity and intercultural societies.
- Welcome and respect everyone.
- Defend the dignity and rights of foreigners, forced migrants, refugees and displaced people.

Electronic copies of these handbooks are available from the Catholic Institute of Education.

# HUMOUR

## Jesus and OFSTED\*

Then Jesus took his disciples up the mountain and gathered them around him. He taught them saying:



"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God.  
Blessed are the meek.  
Blessed are they that mourn.  
Blessed are the merciful.  
Blessed are they that thirst for justice.  
Blessed are you when you are persecuted.  
Blessed are you when you suffer.  
Be glad and rejoice for your reward is great in heaven."

And James said, "Are we supposed to know this?"  
And Simon Peter said, "Will we have a test on this?"  
And Phillip said, "I don't have any paper."  
And Bartholomew said, "Do we have to spell correctly?"  
And Mark said, "Do we have to hand this in?"  
And John said, "The other disciples didn't have to learn this."  
And Matthew said, "May I go to the toilet?"

Then one of the Pharisees who was present asked to see Jesus' lesson plan and inquired of Jesus:

"Where are your learning and assessment objectives?  
What range of teaching strategies did you draw from?  
Did you provide a differentiated provision?  
Can I see a cross section of pupils work?"

And Jesus wept.

*\*OFSTED Office for Standards in Education, UK*

*With thanks to an anonymous contributor to the RE-XS website.*

# INTERNATIONAL NEWS

## Sr. Elizabeth Johnson explores human kinship with God's creation

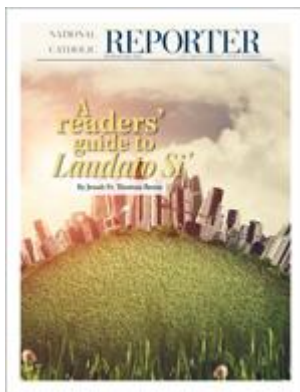
(Beth Griffin - from a talk titled "Creation: Where Do People Fit?" at Mary House, a Catholic Worker house in New York's East Village)



While it may come as a shock, humans are neither central nor supreme in the grand scheme of creation. Humans have a place among other beloved creatures of the same living God, and it's more humble kinship than dominion.

The natural world and its creatures are in crisis as a result of consumerism and greed, as well as their diminished place in contemporary religious imagination, Johnson said. The remedy is a 180-degree conversion to the earth by focusing on God who loves the earth.

Johnson said that Pope Francis' encyclical "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home" offers a religious vision of environmental coexistence that is different from the traditional picture. It calls for a new way of being human that will enhance and not diminish those with whom the planet is shared. June 18 is the one-year anniversary of *Laudato Si'*! [Download our readers' guide to \*Laudato Si'\* here.](#)



As a theological extension of the option for the poor, Johnson said nature becomes the new poor and "our love of a neighbor needs to extend to include the poor natural world diminished by an elite group of humans."

Johnson said the longtime Catholic understanding of creation was of a pyramid with humans at the pinnacle and all other creatures as a neutral backdrop. "There's a hierarchy and we're on top and others are meant for our use," she explained.

"I find it daunting to realize how deeply this sense of human beings as the rulers of nature has shaped Christian belief and practice and has largely erased creation from the faith experience," she said.

Johnson said the theory developed from ancient Greek philosophy that valued spirit over matter, leaving rocks and plants farthest from the divine and angels the closest.

In *Laudato Si'*, Francis points out that Jesus Christ rejected such a notion of hierarchy:

*Yet it would also be mistaken to view other living beings as mere objects subjected to arbitrary human domination. When nature is viewed solely as a source of profit and gain, this has serious consequences for society. This vision of "might is right" has engendered immense inequality, injustice and acts of violence against the majority of humanity, since resources end up in the hands of the first comer or the most powerful: the winner takes all. Completely at odds with this model are the ideals of harmony, justice, fraternity and peace as proposed by Jesus. As he said of the powers of his own age: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant" (Mt 20:25-26). [Laudato Si', Paragraph 82]*



An alternative to the pyramid of privilege metaphor is the circle of life that embraces evolution and a biological history shared among all creatures on the planet, Johnson said.

“We have to conclude, very radically, the living breath in us has the same source as the living breath in the animals. Because we are all created by God, we have more in common than what separates us as creatures,” she said.

Francis is contributing something new to the long-running discussion by emphasizing the community of creation. There is no justification for domination over other creatures, because they also have intrinsic value and share in the love of God.

Moreover, mistreatment of nature and creation is profoundly sinful, and contradicts the will of the creator that the world should flourish, Johnson said.

The conversion to the earth includes intellectual, emotional, ethical and spiritual components. Intellectually, the shift away from a human-centered view of life will honor the presence of God “in, with and under the ecological community of all species,” Johnson said.

Emotionally, there is a need to turn away from the delusion of the separate human self and isolated human species to a felt kinship and affiliation with all creatures. If the effort is successful, Johnson said images such as “Brother Sun, Sister Moon” -- central characters in St. Francis of Assisi’s “Canticle of the Creatures” -- become felt truths and not poetry.

Ethically, conversion requires society to “relate to the earth with respect, not rapaciousness,” she said. “A moral universe limited to the human person is no longer adequate. Attention must re-center on the whole communion of life.”

“Being converted leads us to weave the natural world back into our religious imagination with prayer, art, music, justice and charity. Our challenge is to develop a spirituality that makes loving the earth and its creatures an intrinsic part of faith in God, rather than an add-on,” Johnson said.

She continued: “Ecological conversion is falling in love with the earth as an inherently valuable living community in which we participate, and bending every effort to be faithful to its creative well-being because we love God who loves the earth unconditionally.”

“We’re not talking simply about a moral mandate. This is a call to a deeper relationship with God that transforms us to a greater-heartedness in resonance with the love who made and empowers us all,” Johnson said.

“How could God create the whole world and let only one species make it through death?” she concluded.

[Beth Griffin is a freelance journalist based in New York.]

<http://ncronline.org/blogs/eco-catholic/catholic-worker-house-sr-elizabeth-johnson-explores-human-kinship-god-s-creation>



Professional Society of Religious Educators