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Editorial: Being Disagreeable

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In years gone by, whenever I mentioned that I was involved in religious education, my father-in-law would say 'religions are the cause of more disagreements and more wars than anything else'. I would reply 'yes, perhaps they are, and that's a really good reason to study them'. I don't suppose I ever quite convinced him, but I still think that education – especially religious education – should value disagreement as well as agreement. Being 'disagreeable' can sometimes mean saying something that is important, even if it can at other times simply mean being unpleasant; avoiding disagreement can sometimes mean saying things that are bland and unimportant, even if at other times it can be wonderfully creative. This issue of the BJRE represents many of the most interesting forms of disagreement and agreement in today's world, starting with an account by Eline Minnaar-Kuiper and Gerdien Bertram-Troost of the large group of people who do not wish to associate with any specific religious community. What is the right religious education for 'non-affiliated' young people? Being non-affiliated is not the same as being confused (and being affiliated is not the same as being certain), and it will surprise some readers to find evidence here of the continuing significant influence on 14-16-year-olds from the parents and homes, along with other non-school influences. At that age, there is a stress on separation from one's parents, but it is clearly not as radical a break as adolescents and their parents often fear. The influence from beyond the school is also taken up in Edward Wright's article on media literacy as a way in to confessional Catholic RE in Malta. Catholic educational traditions are well established as involving home and church, as well as school, and insights into how this might work is always welcome.

It is not just in schools and family homes that people are 'becoming', of course. This continues into the period described as 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett 2004), and, from personal experience, it continues throughout life – if we are lucky. Caroline Gustavsson describes how young adults (aged 19-29) in Sweden pursue their meaning-making. 'I cannot say that I belong to a religion or something', one respondent says, 'but I am a Christian, but I am not a believer'. We are as capable of disagreeing with ourselves, it seems, as much as with other people. And there is more openness than is sometimes expected within and beyond religious traditions, an openness described here in terms of 'existential configurations' and also described elsewhere (in previous editions of the BJRE) as 'worldviews'. David Carlsson's account of Swedish RE teacher education and Maximilian Broberg's account of Swedish RE teaching materials complement a Swedish sub-theme in this issue of BJRE. Carlsson talks of teachers hoping for RE as 'safe spaces'. That such safe spaces are needed in a society thought of – elsewhere in the world – as an already 'safe' country, highlights the personal, existential, challenges that young people experience even in the most supportive environments. And Broberg provides an account of teaching materials used in RE, and how these are intentionally used to expand the classroom experience beyond traditional 'school-like' resources, in order to tap into the lives of students outside school.

The interaction between religion, policy and schooling is explored by Leslie Francis, David Lankshear and Emma Eccles. UK policy on schools of a religious character (with some having more, some less, control by the church) provides a kind of 'field experiment'. The peculiarities of the UK law mean that schools – which draw on local communities and so are not necessarily 'chosen' by families – give a picture of how policy differences may influence schools. In a global context where there is such a variety of practice in how much influence or control religious communities have over schooling, this study provides a helpful guide. It concludes that one way or another,

church influence seems to affect the attitudes of school children. And the importance should be emphasised of the Francis Scale, used in this article and developed by one of its authors. The scale is used in quantitative empirical research across the world, examining the religious attitudes of children and young people.

Zrinka Štimac's research, based in Bosnia and Herzegovina – like Pauline Kollontai's work on religion and peace in the same country (Kollontai, chapter five in Buchanan 2013) – provides another good example of a balance between the influence of religious and 'secular' groups on schools. In a region where many – not unreasonably – blame religions for recent conflicts (as my father-in-law did), here we have religious groups involved in making peace. Such examples should be treasured by all those who recognise the (dangerous) importance of religion in so many lives. The author's wish for 'integrative education' is heartfelt.

A larger-scale 'field experiment' in the relationship between RE and policy is provided by Peng Nai, Jianfei Sun, Yinzhu Zhang and Guang Yang in their article on RE in an 'atheist' state. China is also a context in which religion is alternately seen as both a problem and a solution. I live in the UK, a state whose history is as much a history of conflict over religion as anything else, and so the sensitive research on RE in China provides a fascinating comparison – the similarities and the differences are both revealing. The relatively small but growing research literature on Chinese religious education is an important development in the field. The increasing recognition of pluralism – some seeing this positively, some not – is well worth further research and understanding. It is good, too, to welcome the article by Jessica Navarrete, Angélica Vásquez, Efraín Montero and Daniel Cantero, who examine RE in Chile. Research on RE in Latin America is – like that on China – a growing field, and one that is well represented in this in-depth study of Catholic RE in a single region.

Some see a concern for knowledge in RE as contrasted with the personal and dialogic approaches to RE; some see academic research in RE as contrasted with professional practice in classrooms. Not so Peter Woodward, who spent a lifetime contributing to personal, dialogic, developments of religious knowledge and understanding in the Shap Working Party and all the academic and professional support linked to that work. His most agreeable life is celebrated in Brian Gates' obituary.

I hope you find much to agree with and perhaps disagree with in this issue of the BJRE. It is in dialogue – real dialogue, and not an attempt to resolve all differences – that RE lives and breathes.

Arnett, J J (2004) *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road From the Late Teens Through the Twenties*; Oxford: OUP.

Buchanan, M T (ed) (2013) *Leadership and Religious Schools: International Perspectives and Challenges*; New York: Continuum.

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