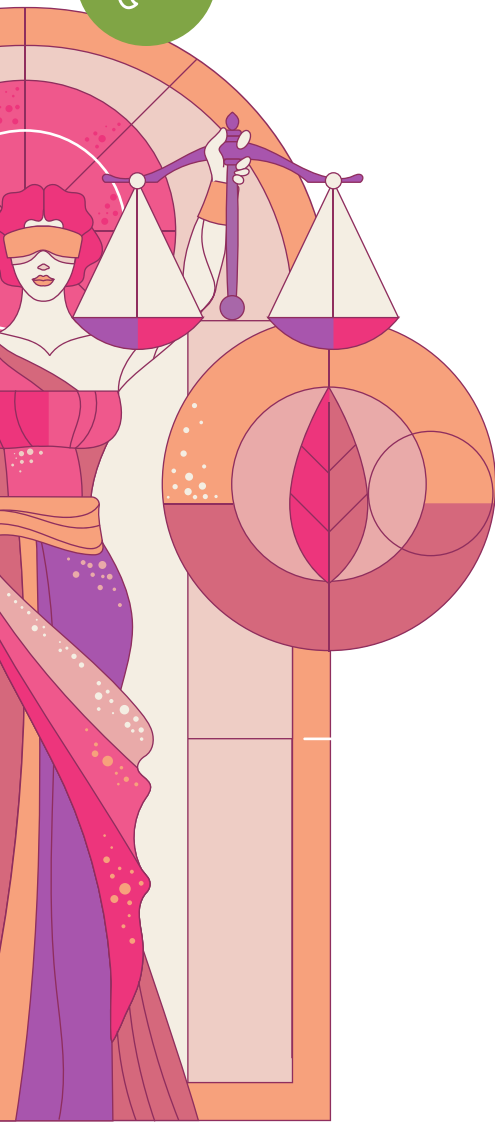




RE and justice: an interview with Jonathan Gullis MP and RE teacher Nkita Weldon

Jonathan Gullis is MP for Stoke North. His partner **Nkita Weldon** is a Head of RE in the Midlands. We interviewed them both about justice, anti-racism and equality issues.

negative stereotypes. When I met Muslims at university, my religious education continued; it was enlightening. I was shocked to find how much Muslims and Christians have in common.

Also, my dad was very religious, a proper God-fearing man – he had hoped to be a priest. He left the Catholic Church and became an Anglican, and faith is very important to him and an influence on me, of course. For myself, I'm not a non-believer, but I've got a lot of questions. I say that I've lost God and one day may find God again.

How did your own RE at school have an impact on you?

Nkita: Not mind-blowing. One lesson a week, with a teacher who got us to read a textbook and take notes, but I really enjoyed it. When I was aged about 14 in RE, the teacher was talking about something philosophical and I asked 'How do we even know that the grass is green?' The class laughed, but the teacher said: 'You should study philosophy.' I took pride in her acknowledgement and years later I did study philosophy, and now am an RE teacher myself.

Jonathan: I went to a Benedictine independent school, so religion was at the heart of what we did, and I always carried a Bible. RE was huge. Everyone did GCSE RS. I got an A – I was chuffed. But at university I realised I was really poor in my knowledge of other world religions. The terror attack of 9/11 happened when I was 11, and the media perpetuated

What role do you think RE can play in pupils developing a sense of their own identity?

Jonathan: RE can play an important role. I met schools from across Stoke at the city council for a day conference of debates on RE, and it made me think how people identify via religion, and it leads to kindness. I think that contributes to Stoke being voted 'kindest city' in the pandemic recently. The Catholics, the Muslims, the Methodists, prominent faith communities in the city, are the heart and lifeblood of our communities in so many ways.

Take Swanbank Methodist Church in Burslem, where outreach to young people, social programmes, youth work, [a] food bank [and] educational initiatives are all centred. This shows young people how religious identities can have an impact. I hope RE continues to have a strong place in the curriculum.

Nkita: In theory RE shows pupils how to explore their own identity, understand other faiths and consider justice issues.

But I've worked in various parts of the country, and the ability of RE to contribute to personal identity well is undermined without enough time and priority being given to the subject. RE teachers want to teach depth and breadth, to explore identity, justice, truth, all the big questions and all the big ideas. But they don't always get the chance.

Jonathan: I'm a trained Citizenship teacher, and I know that RE is one of the beautiful subjects where students learn the importance of debate and dilemma, [and] religious, moral and philosophic perspective. RE is where young people can discuss, for example, not just how Jesus and his disciples acted but also questions of justice, fairness and equality today.

Current Conservative educational thinking has a focus on 'levelling up', or on 'narrowing the gap'. How are these policy ideas connected to ideas about justice?

Jonathan: I think the idea of levelling up is a really powerful notion. Places like Stoke have been abandoned by governments of different parties. Stoke has – and needs – so many charitable organisations, where the community comes together to help in the hardest of times. We need justice to make sure people have access to all the opportunities possible. That's a Conservative value. That ideal of justice is really important to me. A Christian perspective urges us to love our neighbours.

Nkita: Not looking from a political perspective, but this educational aspiration to narrow the gap is good, and I think everyone should be behind this. Teachers are among those who can make progress with this agenda most of all. This is a part of what we work for.

President Joe Biden quoted Ecclesiastes in a speech: 'For everything, there is a time and a season.' He spoke of 'a time to heal'. In our national life after COVID-19 and Brexit, do you think we need a time to heal?

Jonathan: I think that 'Brexit healing' began in December 2019 when the election result came out. It brought an end to the 'will they, won't they' debates, and we have now ended up leaving, with a deal. The healing is so important with COVID-19 because of the seriousness of our health, economic and social situations. Stoke was already a bit like a moment in an Anthony Joshua fight: knocked down, but we will get back up again.

Nkita: Brexit and COVID-19 can be polarised and branded as 'them and us'. A platform of understanding difference is needed – there will always be difference in society, but encouragement to listen to each other and debate is of most importance. RE can make its own contribution to this, of course.

Jonathan: We need some politeness in debate. I don't want to be someone's 30-second Twitter clip and get abusive and aggressive responses. Politicians have a duty – in the House – to argue from their own perspectives, legal, moral or religious, disagreeing politely. We have to set the tone.

Can you explain how and why Conservatives are against racial prejudice?

The Conservative Party suffers from its image from the past. It is challenging for Conservative voices to discuss equality. We have, for example, many traditional and evangelical supporters; some MPs voted against LGBT+ marriage. We have not always spoken up against racism. Now it's time to be more outward-looking. The Left have to be careful: the recent report on anti-Semitism in the Labour Party shows there is good and bad on both sides. We all need to take responsibility for rooting out racism. To me, the Conservative Party is the party of equal opportunity and anti-racism.

Conservatives have had two female Prime Ministers, the first Muslim Chancellor and first Hindu female Home Secretary – we passionately believe in the benefits of a multicultural and diverse society. We uphold the British values of respect for people's differences and beliefs.

In Stoke, some right-wing extremists have been a bit noisy – and nasty – in their anti-Muslim and anti-migrant stances. Conservatives say they stand for fairness for all. What do you think promotes respect?

We have a history in Stoke with the [British National Party]: they had nine councillors. I think our community felt that 'Lab' and 'Con' were not speaking for them. In that vacuum, extreme elements came in, taking advantage of disillusion. Mainstream parties – like centre-right Conservatives – want a society where no one apologises for the skin they were born into. I'm not hiding from racism: of course black lives matter. The UK celebrates that we are a multicultural society. A black or Asian life matters to me as much as to any left wing politician. Access to the top jobs for people from minority backgrounds is an issue we need to face up to. What is positive is seeing the Conservative and Labour Parties have people from diverse ethnic backgrounds at all levels of each Party.

I think my party is a party of meritocracy.

Nkita: I think in tackling racism in the classroom it's important teachers never shy away. The challenges vary in different parts of the country – in inner London, suburban West Midlands or in Stoke, it is important to give students space to say how these issues are for them. My Muslim students were abused by adults on the streets for their hijab choices. Some of my white students have no real experience of knowing people from the Muslim community. What they don't understand, they mock. Here's the RE teacher's job: listen, explain, broaden their young minds and challenge their narrow attitudes, teach them what it means to be balanced. We need to enable our learners to break down the reasons why racism occurs, and emerge with their own ideas of justice.

Jonathan: In the Education Select Committee we are presently looking at disadvantage to see why there continues to be such underachievement by white working-class boys, and also members of some minority ethnic communities. We don't shy away [from] these conversations. I've never walked in a black person's shoes, and I know there would be shocks for me from their experiences. 'Them and us' is a breeding ground for extremism.

What's your rallying call to teachers and to young people on the topic of justice?

Jonathan: I'm a Conservative. I believe in equal opportunity. No matter who you are or whatever your background, we want you have the opportunity to be what you want to be. Coming together – as faith communities often do, and as, for example, the NHS has done during the last year – goes with our belief in social justice and equality of opportunity.

Nkita: As an RE teacher my job is to ensure students can explore, discuss and form their own beliefs. To have a just and equal society – especially in a social media age – I try to enable pupils to push outside their comfort zone and recognise the value of exploring others' ideas before they settle too much into their own opinions.



Nkita Weldon and Jonathan Gullis:
RE teacher and Conservative MP