

Writing towards an anti-racist RE curriculum

Alexandra Brown is an RE teacher, academic and poet whose work focuses on theologies of liberation, Islam within the black American experience, and issues of social justice pertaining to gender, race, class and decolonisation within the education system. She studies and engages with Christian and Muslim theological thought, whilst also observing the cultural influences of Rastafari. Theologically she aligns with Black Liberation Theology and Womanism. She spoke about dealing with racism in RE at 'Strictly RE' in January and in this article, she describes some preliminary work that must be attended to in order to develop an anti-racist RE curriculum.

While it is essential for us to outline and explore what an anti-racist RE curriculum would explicitly entail, within this article I seek to offer important considerations regarding a foundational aspect that is often overlooked: the 'meta-narrative' of an anti-racist RE curriculum.

The term 'meta-narrative' refers to the epistemology (ways of deriving knowledge about a specific subject; but more to the point, knowledge about knowledge). Through engaging with this existential philosophy, we are able to revisit, analyse, critique and complicate certain properties and the assumptive logic that has and continues to act as the

- foundation
- chosen methods
- form
- utility

of our current RE curriculum.

It is crucial to note that engaging in meta-narrative does not in itself negate a position; rather, it acts as a para-dynamic posture. So in essence, I wish to have a conversation about the conversation on creating an anti-racist RE curriculum.

It is through this meta-narrative that we can truly begin to unearth and expose that which creates, perpetuates and normalises racist ideas, violence, dehumanisation and 'white supremacy':

- white (Anglo-Saxon/European) cultural practices and beliefs, norms, languages, theological traditions and interpretation of scripture, formulations of doctrine and physical attributes, and so on, being depicted as normal, universal and the standard by which all others are judged
- in doing so, white being positioned at the epicentre of humanity and consequently rendering everything and everyone else as 'the other' – but more to the point, 'inferior'
- thus accentuating the point made by anti-racist writer and activist Layla Saad who quoted a poem from Kyle 'Guante' Tran Myhre where he wrote 'White supremacy is not a shark, it's the water.' ('How to explain white supremacy to a white supremacist', *A Love Song, A Death Rattle, A Battle Cry* 2018, Button Poetry)

BLACK
LIVES
MATTER

I further contend that at the heart of creating an authentic, rigorous and progressively enduring anti-racist RE curriculum, two key points must be acknowledged:

1. The harmful nature of the prevalent pedagogical lens that informs the RE curriculum

In order to create an anti-racist RE curriculum we must acknowledge that we are working to dismantle our current RE curriculum, and by extension the wider curriculum that perpetuates white supremacy and is deeply entrenched in colonialism.

In order to counter this harmful reality, we must take a linear mapping approach, which will subsequently act as a form of decentring. We can achieve this through a multidisciplinary enquiry about the wider context: what was the socio-political climate at this particular point in history (domestically, globally and geo-politically)?

By doing so, we develop a curriculum that is able to hold conversations about religious beliefs, practices, philosophies and doctrine in juxtaposition to

- invasion/slavery
- racism
- colonialism/empire
- other ongoing socio-political systems and realities that articulate the degradation of human life and act as the foundation for modernity, but more to the point, Britain's geo-political stature. This must be acknowledged, referenced and explored both in theory and in practice, inside and outside the classroom.

We must cease to depict religion/religious life as an innocent ahistorical discourse.

Through this existential paradigm we can explore the following questions:

- To what extent does the RE curriculum conceal and implicate itself within structures of violence, both spectacular and mundane?
- If our current RE curriculum seeks to establish equality through ideas of 'sameness', in what ways do clear and often irreconcilable differences inscribe social, religious and racial hierarchies?

2. Politics and a radical shift in power dynamics

Working towards an anti-racist RE curriculum is indeed a political act. The education system is an arena that is informed by, dedicated to and regulated by policies, acts and legislations. Therefore, the curriculum must be understood as a political manifestation of a wider institution. However, I do wish to stress the difference between

- the curriculum being an integral part of a politicised space
- the curriculum – and by extension, the classroom – being a site where our political biases and ideologies are placed at the helm of our practice

While a radical shift in power dynamics will undoubtedly necessitate the loss of power and privilege for some, it will ultimately equate to a liberating and humanising curriculum for all.

Consequently, I propose the following changes:

- 1 All stakeholders within the education system must take direction and advice and work in collaboration with anti-racist and decolonial scholars, activists, groups and existing practitioners who are much more equipped and knowledgeable about this area.
- 2 Anti-racist labour must not equate to free labour. In order to create such a curriculum, we will need and will rely on the resources, time and insight of anti-racist workers (who will in most instances not be white). We must ensure that schools and organisations are paying for their expertise, as we would with any other service. Not doing so perpetuates racist power dynamics that objectify and exploitatively extract and consume their labour. Such a disposition also sends the message 'You should be grateful that we are even discussing this – our mere acknowledgement is your payment.'

This anti-racist and decolonial project must propel itself beyond the arena of the RE curriculum and into public life. Not doing so allows for the privileged and the deprived to return to their unequal material conditions in a society that still remains structurally intact.

In other words, an anti-racist RE curriculum must be birthed and cultivated within a holistic understanding that 'Your liberation is bound in my liberation, let us work together.'

Alex Brown