

**Standing Advisory Council For Religious Education
(SACRE)**

Third Public Annual Lecture

Indarjit Singh

**Director of the Network of Sikh
Organisations**

**Regular contributor to “Thought for the Day”
giving his**

**“Thoughts on Religious
Education”**

Transcript of the lecture

Held on

Wednesday, 27 February 2002

At

Buckland Infant & Nursery School
Buckland Road
Moor Lane
Chessington.
6.30-7.30pm

Thoughts on Religious Education by Indarjit Singh

Introduction

It is a real pleasure to be here.

Now, I am going to speak, and perhaps a little controversially in some areas and I hope that afterwards you'll take me to task, question me, because that is the more interesting part – the discussion - but now I want to set the scene. I want to set the scene about some of the current concerns about religious education, about the push/pull attitude to faith schools with the Government at one time saying they are wonderful things and at another time seeming to suggest that there is some possibility that they may be divisive. I want to talk about the teaching of citizenship and concern that this addition to the curriculum might be the expense of religious education. And lastly about religious education itself and how, despite apparent contradictions, I believe it can help move us to a more inclusive society.

Personal reflections

I'd like to start with some personal reflections. These are about four Singh brothers who went to school many, many years ago in Sutton Coldfield. We were not only the only turbaned children in a school of six or seven hundred, we were also the only non-whites and it was there that I took my first hesitant and protesting steps to interfaith understanding. It started with my two elder brothers making an exciting discovery - Catholics didn't have to go into assembly or RE. Now we didn't know much about Sikhism but we did know that we weren't C of E so we had this very cunning plan. We rushed home with a very reasonable proposition and we got a totally unreasonable response from our mother. We thought we'd get lots and lots of free time if we didn't go into these classes, but my mother said, "There's no question about you opting out, our religion teaches respect for other faiths. Go back and learn something." We know how unreasonable parents can be and we felt it very, very strongly but in years to come we had reason to be grateful.

Concerns

A concern about education in schools and it's less so now and there has been real progress but it is still there to some extent, it can be narrowly focused and centred on the majority culture. I vividly remember, being made to learn bits of Shakespeare at school, things like John O'Gaunt's words from Richard II, 'This royal throne of Kings, this sceptred isle, this other Eden, demi-paradise, this fortress built by nature for herself against infection and the hand of war'. About infection, I wonder how that squares with BSE and foot and mouth disease? The question goes on 'This happy breed of men, this little world, this earth, this realm, this England'.

Now, at school, because of the culture of the times no-one questioned this narrow view of the world, not even us foreigners, we didn't question it because that was the culture that everyone accepted. But, this country has moved a lot and accepted a lot of other communities, it's moved from those times but there are pockets of resistance that sometimes get in the way of greater inclusion.

It's not only in schooling, it's been there in employment and other areas of life. I remember, it's many, many years ago, in a previous incarnation almost, I started my career as a mining engineer and I got into the fast stream for early promotion and then was told that, by then National Coal Board, that the miners wouldn't like to see a Sikh as their manager, would I go into the scientific department? The curious thing is that, such was the mindset at the time, including my own, that I thought they were being quite reasonable and helpful. I wouldn't say that that is racism. It is simply blinkered thinking. We still see traces of it when we're asked to fill in forms – Surname. Christian Name. So a majority culture can be insensitive to minorities, sometimes causing minor irritation and sometimes real hurt.

I remember a school in the Midlands in the early 80s when a young Sikh boy came to school for the first time wearing a turban. Believe me, minorities can easily be made to feel insecure and inferior in a different dominant culture. The teachers could have been positive and welcoming but the Head turned to the boy and said "Go home and take it off, it's grotesque, like something out of a pantomime". Imagine what that did for the self esteem of that small boy. Now this was in the early 80s and you know that that sort of thing couldn't happen today, we are moving forward towards greater understanding but there have been difficulties on the way.

There's a frequent complaint that minorities isolate themselves in ghettos making it difficult for them to integrate. Herman Ousely in his report on last summer's riots in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham – it sounds like a building society – complained about the self segregation of minority communities as a problem but that's a little unfair. Minorities don't say 'let's look for a nice little ghetto to live in' they look for security and self respect. If we want more inclusiveness the majority also has to work at it and this work varies tremendously in different parts of the country. Here minority communities are very fortunate, there is much greater enlightenment but believe me there are pockets of resistance throughout, in different parts of the country that do not recognise it. Generally though, we just do not know and don't appreciate how fortunate we are in this part of the world.

Inclusiveness

Majorities have to work at this inclusiveness by being more welcoming and I think that's best illustrated by the story of the north wind and the sun. I think most of you know this story, where the north wind and the sun had a bet which of them could make a man walking down the road take his coat off. The wind blew and blew and the man just did his coat up tighter and tighter and then the sun had a turn, it became warm, then it became uncomfortably warm and the man removed his coat. So a warmer welcome to those of different cultures and a deeper understanding of common values, common aspirations and common concerns, as well as a concern for genuine differences in our schools would in my view lessen the cultural pressures for separate schools.

Cultural Differences

Now, let me give an example of cultural difference and how, if it's handled insensitively it can push parents to seek separate education. A teacher complained to me, not very far from here, that Muslim girls were reluctant to change for PE in front of boys. I know I've led a sheltered life but does that sort of thing go on everywhere? I'm a little amazed. I'd be embarrassed and it's not just religion but an increasingly 'anything goes' culture and people suggesting that this is the right way and anyone that thinks differently or feels that their sensitivities are being hurt, must be wrong.

Now, there's a lot of talk about faith schools and there's different arguments and there's a lot of pressure from minority communities to have them. Are they justified under any circumstances? I must say that I had mixed views on this up to about a couple of years ago. On one hand they can help protect the spiritual heritage of the young and vulnerable until the child is old enough to develop necessary self esteem. I think that Shakespeare, going back to him, he's the best protagonist of faith schools because in Hamlet Shakespeare's Polonius says to his son Laertes as he's going off to university, "This above all, unto thine own self be true and it will follow that as the day follows the night that you cannot then be false to any man". If you're true to your own culture, to your own religion, you're infinitely more likely to be a better citizen of this country, but, on the other hand, we all know how religious teaching can also be biased and negative. At their worst, faith schools can encourage religious bigotry and intolerance and that is a real worry. I had these mixed thoughts in mind when, a couple of years ago, I was invited to the country's only voluntary aided Sikh school in Hayes in Middlesex. As soon as I entered the school lobby I saw children's posters about a forthcoming religious festival. It was a Jewish festival. The drama teacher was a Muslim, there was a Jewish teacher and also teachers of other faiths. The children were confident in their Sikh heritage but at the same time respect for other faiths was all too evident.

Today, with the push/pull attitude to faith schools, Government encouragement on the one hand and increasing concern over religious bigotry on the other we naturally look to checks and balances. How can we stop faith schools

becoming areas of bigotry? One of the proposals is to have a minimum proportion of children of other faiths in every new faith school. I personally don't think that will help very much. I think it's much better that every faith school and every non faith school is made to devote at least a stipulated number of hours, a minimum number of hours, teaching about other faiths in a respectful way which stresses commonalities in aspiration and belief. Now, we have an Inspectorate that looks at other areas of the curriculum. This area too, shall be inspected. This moves us towards inclusiveness, respecting one another's religions. The sort of thing that every SACRE stands for.

My hope is that this understanding and respect for the beliefs of others becomes a central aim of education and carries forward to adult life. Now it's not there at the moment to the extent we would like and we see the fracturing of society and further self segregation in different parts of the country, particularly in the north.

Teaching Citizenship

The teaching of citizenship can also help to make ours a more inclusive society. Many people fear that teaching citizenship will erode or undermine the teaching of religion and in examining this it is necessary to look more closely at the interface between religion and citizenship. Now, to do that we need to look at human nature, the reality of human nature and the evidence is all around us in this country, abroad, in many parts of the world is that human beings, that we humans do not come with pre-loaded software of right and wrong or responsibility. Decent, responsible behaviour has to be taught and learnt and the question is 'who does the teaching?' To my mind there are two levels of behaviour, the first is behaviour that keeps us out of trouble. For the small child it's not throwing food around or not kicking aunts and uncles in the shins. For adults it's being reasonably polite to those around us and complying with those in authority and the rules and laws of society. In many ways the teaching of citizenship falls in this category. It's important for children to learn about national institutions, democracy, the media, ethnic identity and the consequences of bullying and racism. These teachings of citizenship or conforming behaviour are not religion although I believe they can be reinforced by the ethics and morality found in religion.

Religious context

Sometimes religion can be at variance with the laws of the land and we see this in many parts of the country where people of religion are persecuted for their beliefs, particularly in totalitarian countries. Religion bases its teachings then on fundamental beliefs. One such teaching, a very important teaching, was that of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, when he said that there is neither Hindu nor Muslim, or by today's extension, Christian, Sikh or Jew, that in God's eyes the labels don't matter. God isn't interested in our different religious labels but in the way we behave towards one another. In this simple sermon Guru Nanak gets at the root of much of the so called religious conflict in the world today. Let

me give an example of what I mean, we all know that when two small boys, it's always boys, start arguing that my dad is taller, stronger, bigger or in some other way better than your dad, the end result almost inevitably is physical conflict. In the same way, much of the conflict between religions has resulted from child-like claims that my religion is better than yours. All too often in the past such attitudes have resulted in violent conflict. In today's smaller and inter-dependent world such attitudes are a recipe for disaster.

I spent a lot of time saying what schools and the education system should do to make ours a more inclusive society but practitioners of different religions also have their responsibilities. Now the main problem there is that the principles of our different religions, like Jesus Christ's teachings and the sermon on the mount are very, very easy to state, very simple, very straightforward. They are easy to state but very, very difficult to live by. So religions over the years have accumulated all sorts of clutter of rituals and superstition that wrongly passes for religion. That is a real problem because then people of no faith will look on the nominally religious and say they're not up to much, they don't stand for anything.

People of religion have been marginalised by others saying that this is nothing to do with religion and religion should keep out of this and that. Religion should be involved in everything to do with justice and peace and better standards and better behaviour towards others, but it has been marginalised. People of faith should look to the current state of their religious practices and do some fairly drastic spring cleaning to discard practices that have nothing to do with true religion and show that our different religions are all essentially pulling in the same direction. Importantly, they all underline teachings that hold the key to balanced living, justice and genuine contentment in our troubled world. I believe one of the greatest gains in our study of the actual teachings of different religions is the discovery that they are not all that different. Our different religions are, in essence, overlapping circles of belief in which the area of overlap is far greater than the smaller area of difference. I believe that in that area of overlap lie common values of tolerance, justice, compassion and peace, values that are the key to both personal happiness and the needs of an inclusive and tolerant society.

Now, I have said many things that some may object to and this is the time for discussion, to take me to task. Thank you for listening to me.

After a time for question and debate Indarjit Singh was thanked by Mrs Chana, Sikh representative on Kingston SACRE.

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