



Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE)

Eighth Annual Public Lecture

‘Teaching – a religious vocation?’

Dr Trevor Cooling

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(a transcript of an unscripted lecture)

WELCOME BY THE CHAIR OF THE SACRE, MRS MARIA JAMES

Good evening everybody and welcome to the eighth annual lecture of the Kingston SACRE. You are very very welcome and it is lovely to see you all here. I am sure this is a very busy time for so many people with reports and exam boards, etc, etc so it is really great to see so many. I would like to warmly welcome Dr Trevor Cooling to Kingston this evening and we are very much looking forward to hearing what you have to say, Trevor. Now I have got a little resumé about Trevor, which I hope you will forgive me for reading as it is the end of term for me too!

Dr Trevor Cooling started his career at a secondary school as a science teacher at Banbury Comprehensive School, following a degree in Science and Education from Cambridge University. After two years at Banbury, he married Margaret (and I think some of you will know Margaret Cooling’s work with “Jesus through Art” and “The Bible through Art”, and may use them in schools) and together they went to London Bible College where Trevor obtained his formal theological education. After that he taught RE for seven years at Aylesbury Grammar School obtaining an MA in RE at the same time. From there he went to work at the Stapleford Centre in Nottingham for 18 years during which time he gained his PhD in RE from the University of Birmingham.

Whilst at Stapleford he led a variety of projects; they included developing distance learning courses for Christian RE teachers, validated by the University of Nottingham. As part of setting up the Stapleford Project, a curriculum development project for teaching Christianity in schools, Trevor and Margaret developed the ‘concept cracking’ approach to teaching Christianity, which became widely used in schools, and I must say in universities, because all of our students have certainly accessed the website and downloaded the ‘freebie’.

From Stapleford, Trevor went as Principal Lecturer to the University of Gloucestershire, where he led the development of a distance learning online degree in Theology, and then to the Diocese of Gloucester as secondary school adviser. He is now back working with the Stapleford Centre leading the 'Transforming Lives' Project, which has the aim of promoting the vocation of teaching amongst the Christian churches.

Trevor is widely published in RE and Christian education and he also enjoys the experience of being a grandfather.

DR TREVOR COOLING

Thank you very much ...and a most important bit about all that was the very last bit, being a grandfather which is what defines me at the moment and is proving to be a wonderful experience.

One of my current roles is serving as a trustee on the RE Council for England and Wales. One of the RE Council's projects is relevant to my talk tonight: the Council has just produced a leaflet on Religious Education, because we are about to launch a promotional campaign for RE in schools, and the leaflet will be going out to teacher associations, to school governors, to people who are critical in making decisions about the curriculum in schools, to politicians - to try and raise the awareness of the contribution that RE makes in schools. I brought one or two copies of the leaflet if you would like to see an example, but there will be a lot more available in due course and you will hear about that through the usual channels.

Just very quickly to introduce you to my current work: I run a project called 'Transforming Lives' – it sounds rather pretentious when I have to describe myself as 'Director of Transforming Lives', but what it basically means is that it is a project which is trying to raise the status of teaching in the Christian churches. What we are trying to do is to look at the vocation of teaching from within the Christian community, and to say to the churches that this is an important role for people within the church to be playing in the wider society. If you are interested in the Project, I have brought some leaflets, and we have produced a Toolkit for churches, with lots of ideas for using the material in the church context which is in a DVD format – again, you are welcome to take one.

A bit later on I would like to show you one of the clips from the DVD so that you can see the sort of thing that the Transforming Lives project is doing, but that is not what I have come to talk about this evening as that is a job which I am doing working within the Christian community. What I want to do tonight is to talk more generally about the idea that teaching is a religious vocation, and in order to introduce that I want to tell you a story which I heard on 'Thought for the Day' one morning.....

It is about a small island off the coast of Africa called Misali, and it is about the fishermen of Misali who discovered that a very effective way of doing their job was to throw dynamite into the water – it made their life much easier, and they got a lot of fish that way...but the problem was that they were, at the same time, damaging what was a very important ecological environment, because it was a coral reef which they were destroying. The Government stepped in to try to stop them.

The first thing the government did was to try persuasion. They talked to the fishermen asking them to please stop doing this, because it is not good for the environment. That didn't work. When your livelihood is involved you need a lot of persuasion to give it up.

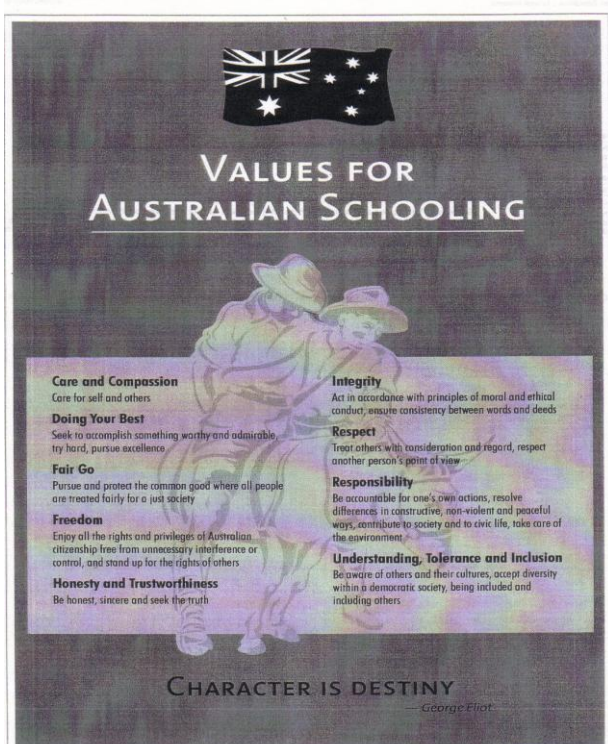
So the next thing the government did was to pass a law banning the dynamiting. The fishermen ignored this and carried on as before.

So then the Government sent in the gun boats to chase the fishermen off and enforce the law. But what the Government hadn't counted on was that the fishermen knew the local area much better than the Navy did, so they were able to evade the gun boats.

Then someone had a bright idea. They realised that the fishermen were devout Muslims, so they went to talk to the community's local imam. And the imam agreed to talk to the people about why it was wrong – that it was not respecting God's environment. The imam talked with the community about what it meant to be faithful to the Qur'an in these circumstances. The dynamite fishing stopped.

Now I want you to hold on to that story, because it is really the nub of what I am going to be saying to you tonight, because it illustrates that the dynamic of religious faith is incredibly relevant to people's daily working life. I suggest that for *teachers* who have a faith, it is a very important dimension of their life which needs recognising – so we will come back to the fishermen of Misali.

Before we do that I want to spend a few moments just looking at the poster, which you have got on your chairs. It comes from Australia. I'll give you a bit of background to it. Like many governments of western democracies, the Australian government is very anxious about disintegration of its national identity, of its sense of community, of its sense of belonging together as a people, particularly since the events of 9/11, and the increase in violent extremism. What the Australian Government have done is to emphasise the importance of values education in schools – so they tried to work out what are the values integral to being a good Australian citizen – a good Aussie (a bit like our debate at the moment about what it is to be British) - and they came up with a list of the values, which are included on the poster you have. The Australian Government required all its schools to display this poster to send a very strong message across to children that this is what it is to be Australian. I would like you to look at the poster and ask how you react to it. Is there anything that particularly strikes you? Then please turn to the person sitting beside you and share your thoughts. *[Comments in the discussion which followed included that there were no Aborigines or women in the picture on the poster.]*



The picture is of two people, one helping the other. It's actually an iconic Australian story. Every Australian child would know what that picture meant; the picture is of a first World War hero, Simpson, who for three weeks in Gallipoli went out into no man's land, and brought back wounded ANZAC soldiers, and then was killed himself - Simpson is seen as representative of all the best in what it is to be Australian – so for Australians it is a very powerful image.

However, some of you have spotted that the picture conveys a strong cultural message because of what is left out of it – there are no women, no Aborigines, no Chinese The picture would probably appeal strongly to young white males. Also there is nothing about where these values are coming from. The approach which has been taken in this poster is that it is the values alone that matter, the values that all Australians share. The assumption is that these values are neutral, and that one's culture doesn't matter, and one's religion doesn't matter. Values are being shown as independent of culture and religion.

I want to suggest that in modern Britain we adopt the same approach to morality and religion – that there is pressure on people of faith not to bring their faith into the public realm.

Let me show you two quotations (slides). The first is from the "Church Times" by the Head of the BBC's Religion and Ethics Department who is a Methodist minister. ('My personal faith is not very relevant to my job....It does not cloud my judgement about what works') This suggests to me that he feels that his faith is not relevant to his job, and that actually he feels his faith might even cloud his judgement, if he allowed it to influence him in his job. The second quotation is Barry Sheerman MP the Chair of the Parliamentary Select Committee for the Department of Children, Schools and Families, when he appeared in a Jonathan Dimbleby's Big Debate - Religion in Schools' on Teachers' TV. The programme is well worth watching if you want to get a sense of the culture in which we are operating. In that programme, Barry Sheerman was talking about the contribution of faith schools, and he said that while, generally, people might not mind faith schools, we all become a little more worried the more seriously people take their faith, which suggests that faith is OK as long as you don't take it too seriously.

In a lecture that Tony Blair gave at the Runnymede Trust, he talked about the relationship between faith, culture and citizenship, reflecting on what it is that makes that mixture work, and if you read that quote at the very last point, at the very last sentence, he says, at the point of citizenship, no distinctive culture or religion supersedes our duty to be part of an integrated UK. In other words, that loyalty to one's faith is superseded by loyalty to one's country. It is interesting that since Tony Blair left his post as Prime Minister, he has started to talk about his own faith a lot more. You may remember that Alistair Campbell who was his Communications Director famously said, "We don't do God". Tony Blair has recently said that the reason he did not 'do God' was because he thought he would not be taken seriously as Prime Minister, if he did talk about God. He would be described, and this is his word, as a 'nutter'. So he did not 'do' God while he was Prime Minister, but has started 'doing' God now.

I think this creates a climate for anybody who is in public life, and who has a religious faith. Let me illustrate. I was at a meeting talking about how can we recruit people from ethnic minority communities to become teachers, and in the middle of the conversation, I suggested that for people from ethnic minority communities, often their religion is very important to them, and if we want them to become teachers, we have to give them *religious* reasons for being teachers. There was a stony silence, because actually we have a history in this country of finding it very difficult to allow people to express their faith in public realms such as education and teaching.

One of the reasons for that is the influence of people such as Richard Dawkins, who has been stirring up opinion recently suggesting that it is almost a thing of shame to hold a religious faith. He was included in the Dimpleby programme and he described bringing up children up in a religious faith as wicked and a form of child abuse - he uses very strong language, because he thinks that religion is irrational and dangerous.

So what we have is a culture where people are very frightened of religion in the public sphere. If you go into a school as a teacher and describe yourself as having a religious vocation to teach, people get very anxious about that. I have a cartoon which illustrates this. (slide) I meet lots of teachers, particularly primary teachers, who feel very uncomfortable with religion. They think that the moment religion gets into the classroom, there is going to be a fight because religion is like that, it is a social evil, it is what makes people fight, it makes people dislike each other... [they have obviously never been to a SACRE meeting which I find is usually a lovely experience] and that is a general perception nowadays.

What I want to do tonight is to try and paint a different picture of what the role of religion could be in public life.

An important question to ask is what is the relationship between people's religious, or non-religious faith, and the values that we all share in common as human beings. The language of community cohesion – 'shared values' is being used a lot now. What is the relationship between shared values, those things that hold us together as human beings in this community, and our specific religious commitments? On the attached diagram (slide), the relation between values and religions is suggested.

[I apologise that there is only room in the diagram for four named belief systems. I'm not trying to exclude any religion which has not been included there, and have deliberately included Humanism as one of the four belief systems. I should add that I support humanist membership of SACREs, and the amendments to Circular 1/94, which are being talked about at the moment, to let this happen.]

So there is a question about how religious faith relates to our common shared spiritual values. [The term 'spiritual values' is more likely to be used in education policy currently than the term 'religious values'.]

There is a growing pressure to focus on the shared values, and keep the religious bit out of schools. It is what we might call the 'sacred secular' divide, and it strongly influences our society, which is why someone like Tony Blair didn't feel, as Prime Minister, he could talk about his faith. And that same pressure is felt by teachers who come to teaching, because of their faith, because they feel it is a God-given calling, but the pressure is on them not to talk about that in public.

I would suggest that that is not the right way forward, because what it does is to emphasise values (in the way that the Australian poster does) with no mention of the beliefs that may underpin those values. What we need to ask is why the Australian pupils would want to keep the values that the Australian government has told them are important if there isn't an underlying shared belief system?

Let me just give you the example of Simon Wiesenthal. I am sure you know Simon Wiesenthal was committed to justice for those who died in the Holocaust, and he was once asked why he worked so passionate about this. What made him put so much value on

justice? His answer was 'When we come to the other world and meet the millions of Jews who died in the camps and they ask us: "What have you done?" I will say: "I didn't forget you." '(slide) was that his commitment to justice was because he held a belief that in the afterlife he would be accountable to those who died in the Holocaust. He felt very strongly about it - what gave him his commitment to the value of justice was his religious belief in the afterlife.

There is a comparable example in Britain to the Australian situation. I don't know whether you are aware that our National Curriculum is underpinned by certain values. You can find them on the website, if you look hard. They are not very prominent, but they are there, and they are very good. The reason that they are included is because the Government got together 200 people from business, politics, the church, the media, from all parts of life, sat them down, and said to them what values should we be teaching children?, and they came up with these values. But what about if a young person says why should I follow these values? The answer - because there are 200 people in this country who think they are very important - wouldn't necessarily motivate anybody. People need to find out why those values are important - that they stem from their beliefs about the nature of what it is to be a human being and about what is important in life. I think the problem with the Australian approach, which leaves out the discussion of beliefs, is that it leaves outside the classroom door, the very thing which is the most important element of the discussion - people's beliefs.

In this country we are lucky, because we have Religious Education to help fill the gap in teaching about beliefs, but this can mean that discussion of beliefs is confined just to RE, where it is considered to be 'safe'.

This slide suggests a way of thinking about the relationship between our particular distinctive beliefs, and our shared spiritual values. This model assumes that we each inhabit a belief system. For some of us that belief system is very clear, for example those who are practising Sikhs, or Hindus, or Humanists, or Muslims, or Christians. Other people, particularly children in school, won't be so clear about their beliefs, but if one probes a little, one finds that they will have often strong beliefs which underpin their approach to life.

The remarkable thing about human beings is that, despite all our differences, when we get together, and start working at it, we find that there is a lot that we have in common, that many of our aspirations are, in fact, shared. We may earth those shared aspirations in very different beliefs, but we do share them and, therefore, we can find lots of opportunity to cooperate together, to work together because our beliefs overlap. The Government is calling this 'shared space' - working together in shared space. What I want to suggest to you - about teaching as a religious vocation - is that, for those teachers that come to teaching because of their religious faith, it is very important that they are enabled to see the relationship between their distinctive religious commitment and their working in that shared space of education.

I have a quotation here from Mark Chater who is currently the QCA RE Adviser. When he was a lecturer in Lincoln, Mark did a research project on the personal faith of teachers, and their professional responsibilities, and his conclusion was that the relationship between those two is incredibly important, and that what makes a good teacher is a person who knows how to bring together their personal faith commitments and their professional responsibilities. What might help these teachers is to be encouraged to talk about their work as people of faith - not to discourage them by saying that it is not professional to talk about their faith at work, to leave it outside school.

I would argue that it is important that we encourage teachers to work at understanding the relationship between their faith, and their professional commitments as teachers. That is why I feel privileged to be involved in the 'Transforming Lives' project. I undertake that project from within the Christian community, and I would love to see that the same can be done from within other religious communities as well.

However, I can understand why there is some anxiety about talking about religion as underpinning the vocation of teaching - people get worried because they see conflict round the corner -they see disagreement between truth claims. What they particularly fear is what I am going to call the 'market share' model of bringing faith into education. What do I mean by this?

This phrase came to mind when I read a comment that Richard Branson made in "The Daily Telegraph" when he lost the battle with Rupert Murdoch for the purchase of Channel 4 – although Branson was angry about having lost, he accepted it grudgingly because, in his words, 'a business man's job is to dominate'. In other words, it is to try and get the biggest market share that he can, that is how he saw business. There are quite a lot of people in the religious world who think like that, who think that the job of a religious faith is to try and dominate in the particular realm in which they move. That frightens people and I can understand why. We need a different model of thinking about how we relate to people of a different faith from us, other than trying to dominate and beat them in what might look like a businessman's game.

I want to just share with you a model from the work of Professor David Ford at Cambridge University, which he calls 'scriptural reasoning'. The picture I have got here (slide) is from St Ethelburga's in the City of London, which was destroyed by an IRA bomb. It has been rebuilt and there was some spare space in the grounds, in which a 'tent of meeting' has been erected, and this has become, if you like, a symbol of interfaith relations. In this space, Muslims, Jews and Christians come together, and bring with them their scriptures, and they can work together on common issues, for example racism, or war and peace, whatever. And they share together, out of their own specific faith commitments, with the intention of finding ways of moving forward together on the issue which they are discussing. Now at the moment, they are only working with the Abrahamic religions but I am very excited that this model could be used for other faiths' discussions, and also for discussions with humanists and atheists.

One has to work creatively on one's understanding of what is meant by scripture, but we all have "texts" which provide authority for us. The point is that we don't need to run away from our differences. We can bring them into the public context, and share them, and work together on understanding the differences, and identifying where and how we can cooperate.

This is a different strategy from the Australians' although the goals are the same. It is making space for the sacred, which is also a mutual space. It is a place where religious faith is important, and it is mutual ... that is different from creating a mutual space, where religion does not get a mention.

I wanted to show you, briefly, a clip from the DVD produced by the 'Transforming Lives' project. That DVD has been made for the church community, so it is about a Christian teacher called Dave Bennett talking about his work as an RE teacher, as a Christian, and reflecting on how he approaches the role, relating to people of other faiths.

(A DVD is played about a Christian teacher whose excellence in teaching has been nationally recognised and who is close friends in the staffroom with a teacher who is an

atheist and a teacher who is a Sikh – and they discuss how their beliefs affect their work in the school. DVD available to view at. http://www.transforminglives.org.uk/dvd_3.php.)

I thought long and hard about showing that DVD clip in an inter-faith context, because it is designed for Christian audiences, and makes assumptions on that basis, but I decided to show it, because it shows how each and every religious community could work with its teachers - and not just with teachers, but with everybody who works in public life - to help them to understand how their faith can underpin their work in education, or politics, or whatever it is, and enable them to develop strong and positive relationships with those of other faiths . When I met Dave (the teacher in the DVD) and his two colleagues who have worked together for, I think about 15 years, the synergy of their relationship in front of the young people (who saw people committed to their own belief, but respectful of others) was really quite electric, and I thought it was a wonderful model. This takes me back to the fishermen of Misali, because what they illustrate was how religious faith can be a huge power for the common good, and to me teaching as a religious vocation can also hold huge power for the common good.

Thank you.

QUESTIONS

1. Whether the Misali fishermen story was advocating blind faith, rather than reason, and a comment about the cartoon's use of a Hindu god's name

In relation to the first point, no, and I would not be an RE teacher, if I believed that blind faith was what we are about. I was using that story to illustrate one point only - that religion can be a power for good, because it can persuade people that they ought to be working for the common good.

In relation to your second point about the cartoon. The cartoon certainly is not meant to be offensive to any of the religions – it is meant to be a caricature to make the point that it can be ridiculous to perceive religion as always being divisive - that's the point of the cartoon. In the cartoon, Jesus' name is used in exactly the same way – and Jesus certainly wasn't in the business of creating conflict either. The cartoon is to help people to identify with their own anxieties, and then to see that these can be groundless.

2. Whether RE didn't take belief (particularly belief in the after life) seriously enough.

Actually I feel that over the last 20 years the belief side of religion has been taken much more seriously in RE, so instead of RE being taught just as things that people do, there is a lot more emphasis now on what underpins people's faith. It is their belief, for example, about the transcendental. If RE is not taught well, it can trivialise religion, and I think that is possibly the point that you are making. Sometimes RE lessons might not convey the real power of religious belief, but I am actually encouraged by the way RE is developing. I think beliefs such as in the after life, which are, to many religious people very powerful factors in their lives, are being taken much more seriously, so I am actually more positive.

3. To avoid teaching becoming 'preaching' or a PR exercise, an approach emphasising 'shared values' would be useful, for example, in showing similar shared values between Christianity and Hinduism.

I certainly am not arguing against the importance of finding shared values. What I am saying is that I am worried by the tendency to say that we can find shared values without looking for a religious dimension in shared values. I want schools to take religion seriously, because it is a very important phenomenon of society rather than just say "we

will leave that for people's private lives and, when we're in school, we will just talk about shared values" - rather than the relationship of shared values to the different beliefs.

4. Whether some of the fear of the expression of faith in public is because of the rise in fundamentalism and extremism.

I think this has been an increasing trend over the last 20 years. It has been accelerated by fears about Al Qaeda and violent extremism, and a sense that if you express strong commitment you are definitely a suspect of extremism. I think our society finds it difficult to understand strong commitment; I think that is a problem, and that is where RE is important.

5. In view of the changes to the KS3 & 4 curriculum which will bring religious tenets out of the RE compartment into a wider sphere, what tips would you give to RE teachers in teaching religious concepts over a group of subjects?

To me, one of the key issues in our society is that we don't know how to use God language outside of RE, so we put God into RE, and leave it there. So in one sense I welcome the opportunity of the new developments in the Key Stage 3 curriculum to enable other teachers to learn to deal with the religious in their realm. I was a science teacher, and I used to tear my hair out at the way people assumed that God language has nothing to do with science, because I think God language has everything to do with science. The issue is how to use that sort of language in an appropriate fashion, which recognises difference of opinion, and all the other things that RE teachers deal with. This has implications for training a wider range of colleagues to help other teachers to deal with these issues – a big challenge, but I do think it is important. So, for example, children would not come away with the impression that you have got an absolute choice between believing in evolution, or believing in God, which is what many of them think.

6. Advice for non-specialist primary school teachers teaching RE...

I think there are two things: one is to help teachers have confidence that the sort of quality teaching that they do in other areas of the curriculum is appropriate in RE, because many primary teachers feel that they have got to be very formal, very safe, when it comes to religious things, so they do not explore the curriculum in the same exciting way as they will do in other subjects. So I think confidence that you can teach as you normally teach is one piece of advice. The other thing is to help the teachers realise that teaching RE is not going to go backfire on them - that the fact that religion is controversial is, in fact, a bonus rather than a threat. That is a whole attitudinal change, and it is about working, I think, alongside people, giving them ideas, and helping them to know how to deal with controversial issues. I didn't have time to talk about controversy but there are strategies for dealing with controversial issues in education – for example, the way you use language, so that you don't, for example, imply in your language that there is only one way of thinking about something. You give children a sense that they can disagree, and that that is OK.

7. What are your views on the SEAL programme? (which has been referred to as a 'non God RE lesson')?...

The SEAL programme is a social and emotional education programme used in schools. It is designed to help children deal with their relationships and their inner selves, and it is an incredibly fruitful programme, because in today's world many children are lacking in social and emotional development. Again I would say the same about emotional health as I do

about spiritual values - that emotional health is a good thing and that ultimately, our understanding of social and emotional health rests on our beliefs about what it is to be a human being- a view on what emotional health is will depend on one's anthropology (one's view of what it is to be a human being), and for me that view of what it is to be human rests on my Christian faith. So I think that to teach social and emotional education without any reference to beliefs is a problem, and I would want to see the programme underpinned by people reflecting on why they think this value, or this approach to life is important. For example, why is it important that I treat other people with respect? Pupils need help in thinking that through.

8. Much school policy is now based on the 'Every Child Matters' framework which does not include any reference to spiritual development – what is your view on this?

I think 'Every Child Matters' is a wonderful example of what I have been talking about in the sense that it was constructed to be religiously neutral, but what it actually is, is very fundamentally premised on the idea that the spiritual isn't an important area of life, so there isn't any reference to the spiritual, but instead you get things like 'achieve economic well-being' in it. Now the question is what does that mean? What is it to achieve economic well-being? Well, for many people it will be to accumulate as much money as you can. For other people, it would be to learn to be a good steward of the resources that you have. Now which of those two ways you go depends on fundamental beliefs about the nature and purpose of life, and if you do not expose and explore those beliefs, what happens is you inculcate them by default, and the danger I think is that 'Every Child Matters' inculcates a view of life, which says that religion doesn't matter. Otherwise, I think the programme is great. I have been a foster parent, and I think the frustrations of trying to deal with children who are being cared for when nobody talks to anybody else in the local authority is absolutely mind-bending, and it really can destroy children's lives. So I am a passionate believer in 'Every Child Matters', but I do think that it makes a big mistake by not making reference to the beliefs that I mentioned

MARIA JAMES: Great questions, great answers. Thank you very much indeed for those stimulating questions. I have heard Trevor speak on a number of occasions and have always been challenged and excited by what he has to share with us. I do wonder if we have been complicit in that 'secular sacred' divide for too long.....perhaps that is a discussion for another time.....our thanks again to Trevor.