

Anti-racist RE: 20+ key ideas for teachers of RE

Anti-racist religious education

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This is a brief annotated glossary of some key ideas about racism for teachers of RE. It is a modest contribution to the needs of teachers of RE. Each of these terms is contested and open to much academic and critical reflection and debate. These brief notes are intended to enable teachers of RE to have a simple conceptual guide to this complex field and to see what they agree with here, and where they would express the ideas differently themselves. Some research suggests teachers have a ‘fear of getting it wrong’ in working in this area. Clarity about key terms may help.

Readers are also invited to consider what extra ideas might be added. The application of the ideas and key terms to RE is just a first step towards increasingly thoughtful and professional approaches to anti-racist RE. Good and deepening understandings of the terminology described here may enable teachers to challenge and confront racism where it appears in schools – in curriculum planning, or in classroom dialogue, or in the religions / worldviews studied. Planning good RE needs pedagogies which support egalitarian values and democratic processes. Teachers of RE may also need to confront racism in themselves, in their school staffrooms and among their pupils and the communities they serve.

There is no pretence of neutrality here: responding to injustice doesn’t work from neutrality, but from understanding and a commitment to equality, so the endeavour of this piece of provocation is to contribute to guiding the debate. These project materials begin with the premise that in the RE classroom teachers are doing the right thing when they confront racism. We hope it helps and are eager to hear from readers about how to improve it.

1. **Race and ethnicity**

Race and ethnicity are socially constructed categories of human identity and belonging. Sometimes a classification of a person’s race or ethnicity can be externally imposed upon them, in a kind of power game, but these categories can also be a matter of powerful self-identification. Dominant social groups often seek to impose racial or ethnic identifiers on marginal communities, but in RE, teachers may be interested to enable learners to be thoughtful about their own ways of identifying themselves. Pupils also need to learn to be alert to the manipulative and sometimes dehumanising uses of the language of ethnicity and race: a dangerous aspect of racism in itself. Self-identification in terms of race and ethnicity is often powerful for minority or marginal communities because it enables people to position themselves in relation to their society, saying ‘This is who I am.’ Black consciousness movements are a frequent part of the fabric of anti-racist struggles in many times and places. The concept of ‘whiteness’ is often presumptuously normalised but needs thoughtful interrogation as well. Racism is not uni-dimensional – for example always ‘white on black’. Racism can manifest itself wherever one ethnic group uses its power unjustly against another.

2. **Racial equality**

A social goal, racial equality is described by some as a matter of equality of opportunity, but others look at outcomes and ask questions about why, in contemporary societies, black people are more likely to be, for example, poor, imprisoned, arrested,



disempowered or unemployed than white people. The UK has the 2010 Equality Act as a basis for the rights of all citizens to equal treatment, and the Equality and Human Rights Commission monitors the ways schools and other institutions work towards racial equality. While examples of racism may often occur against black people in white majority societies like the UK, there are many 'racisms' and wherever one ethnic group holds power over another ethnic group racism can be found. Teachers of RE examine the meaning of racial equality in moral, religious, political, and social terms, referring to examples of the teaching and practice (positive and negative) of varied religions and worldviews. Sometimes teachers of RE need to confront false equalities and expose the discrimination against minority ethnic communities which clothes itself in egalitarian language. Desmond Tutu suggested under apartheid that he could not discuss equality while under the boot of an oppressor.

3. **Religious complicity in racism**

In past centuries and present times, religions are sometimes complicit in racism. Internal voices from – for example – Christianity or Islam may be keen to stress the examples of anti-slavery work from their communities, but it is historically accurate to recognise that religious people have been slavers, and have sometimes referred to their religion in justifying this. Profiting from racist exploitation and slavery by religious people is not something the RE curriculum should hide, but rather an educational exploration of this kind of question: why don't the high ideals of this or that religion make a conclusive difference to members of the religion doing justice with regard to slavery? Questions about whether and how religious communities can make reparation or repent of past involvement in the enslavement of black people can be explored in RE. There are also questions to consider about the prevalence of continuing everyday racism of religious community life today. In the UK context, it is the shameful complicity of Christians in slave trading and other forms of racism that may be top of the list of examples to be studied.

4. **Religious liberations from racism**

Religion has a track record of liberation as well as oppression, from Moses to Guru Nanak. Good RE explores what makes a difference between the religion that ties you down and the religion that sets you free. Examples are often controversial, but people such as Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, Revd Dr Martin Luther King, Barack Obama and Mahatma Gandhi, none of them 'plaster saints' or perfect humans, are examples worthy of study not least because they sought – successfully – to bring religious, spiritual and moral ideas to bear upon questions of human liberation and they carried millions with them in the 20th and 21st centuries. In RE, it is appropriate to study examples of the ways religion has sometimes been – and still can be - a power for liberation from slavery, oppression and racism, including looking at examples from the contemporary world, not merely recent history. Such studies should not shy away from critical questions.

5. **Multicultural society, multicultural education and multiculturalism**

A multicultural society can be described as one where people with a wide range of different cultures live together, not by treating all as one, or demanding that everyone



lives uniformly to the pattern of one culture, but by recognising and celebrating diversity. Multiculturalism would then be the policies and politics designed to make such a society work for the wellbeing of all its groups and members. Multicultural education would then seek to enable all learners to understand the range of cultures in their society, with possible attitudinal intentions of tolerance, respect, and the celebration of difference. Multiculturalism in the UK has been subject to extensive critiques from political views both the right and the left. Teachers of RE are wise when they are careful not to use the term without some exploration for learners of both its meanings and the critiques to which it is subject. Multicultural education may focus on culture rather than race and ethnicity. Does this carry a danger of minimising the impact of racism on life? Some critics of multiculturalism argue that it can reinforce racism, particularly by reinforcing an imbalance of power in which a 'host' culture (a white culture?) takes centre stage and other cultures are marginal.

6. **Anti-racist education**

Accepting that racism infects not just personal attitudes and behaviour but also our institutions, including schools, anti-racist education seeks a curriculum and pedagogy which will confront and challenge past and present racism. This involves providing an education where historical roots and current 'reasons' for racism and its impacts are exposed and explored so as to bring the negative human consequences of racism home to those who are racist. In RE, this kind of education examines how religions and worldviews are sometimes complicit in racism and sometimes liberative. But anti-racist RE is not content to study this phenomenon – the learning also seeks to confront and challenge racist ideas and attitudes, in any religion or worldview, in a school or educational system and in learners themselves. So anti-racist RE includes among its specific educational aims the reduction of discrimination and the reduction of attitudes of prejudice. And positively, the development of broad minded and open-minded engagement with humanity in all our diversity. The term 'anti-racist RE' is obviously important here: good RE is seen in some senses as promoting harmony and justice, so has a contribution to make to anti-racism.

7. **Community cohesion**

This concept describes positive visions for diverse societies in which people from all backgrounds can have a sense of belonging, identity and being valued, all benefitting from similar opportunities. The term came to prominence in UK politics from the 'Cantle Report' of 2001, rejecting some negativity associated with multiculturalism (was that idea too much about separate communities? Did it marginalise 'minority' cultures and leave them disempowered?). Cohesive communities should be characterised by relationships of trust and recognition and celebration of difference. Community cohesion programmes intend to challenge separation or segregation, using encounter and dialogue to break down barriers. Intercultural education (a similar term widely used in European social and educational discourse) provides a vision of living together which includes the mutual enrichment of cultural interchange. Teachers of RE know about this: it is the presumption of government guidance on RE that we promote cohesive communities, the values of tolerance and respect. Teachers of RE are often rightly proud



of the attitudinal work they do in these areas, promoting listening, dialogue, attention to the 'other' and attitudes that value mutuality, respect, harmony, and the celebration of difference. While taking some credit for RE's positive role in promoting diversity, it is worth thinking as teachers of RE about whether – and how - community cohesion relates to anti-racist RE and how our teaching and learning can be yet more effective in these intentions.

8. **Prejudice reduction**

There is a wide literature on the subject of how prejudice can be reduced. Contact and knowledge are two of the tools with which teachers might work to reduce prejudice. Note that this theorising accepts that negative and racist attitudes are very persistent and not easily broken down, but sees the reduction of prejudice as a stepped or gradual process and a real possibility: many pupils are influenced at school to become less racist. Many teachers become less racist through their work with pupils of all backgrounds! Teachers of RE might see prejudice reduction as a goal of the subject and/or a wider social goal of education. Anti-bias theories often focus on providing correct and challenging information to learners about the groups against which they are prejudiced. Contact theories suggest that encounters between prejudiced people and members of the groups to which they hold antipathy creates the challenging circumstances in which negative attitudes can be exposed and changed. Many teachers of RE blend these two approaches, seeking to fight prejudice through encounters and through knowledge. RE might intend to reduce the threat-levels some learners associate with the perceived 'other' by providing accurate, factual information and encounters. Such approaches might seem to concentrate on dealing with the 'hearts and minds' of white racists: affirmation of black experience and support for just and equal opportunities for all surely go alongside prejudice reduction work in dealing with racism.

9. **Cultural hegemony**

Hegemony describes the power and dominance of one human group within or between other groups. Militarily enforced examples such as colonialism backed by armed force are significant in histories of racism, but cultural hegemony describes the processes by which a ruling or dominant class or ethnic group holds power and influence over the everyday thoughts, beliefs, and behaviour of social groups and institutions – as well as individuals. The cultural hegemony of ruling classes or ideologies is often strengthened and enforced by controlling the values, ideals, and beliefs accepted in a society. Such cultural hegemony affects the everyday experience and perceptions of those within a society – from various ethnicities. Teachers of RE have an interest in exploring how religions or worldviews can function to reinforce cultural hegemony and marginalise outsiders, but also conversely to challenge the dominance of 'the powers that be' within a society, drawing attention to different values, and legitimising struggle. Martin Luther King: 'who marches out of step hears a different drum.' Good RE teaching will examine how cultural hegemony reinforces racism, and what can disrupt this process in favour of equalities and justice.



10. A decolonialised curriculum

This concept begins by accepting that our curriculum has evolved from a colonial past where unjust assumptions about race were embedded into both our selection of topics in RE and into our methods of study. The processes of decolonising the RE curriculum include asking questions about who decides which stories are told, from what perspectives and with what emphases. Here's an important question: 'what knowledge is privileged in this curriculum and why?' Teachers' planning in RE can cultivate an environment in which all learners can engage honestly, respectfully and rigorously in explorations of religion and worldviews that hear and encounter perspectives from those who have experienced injustice, not just 'histories written by the winners'. Questions like these illustrate the point: Does RE listen to Hindu voices? What about Dalit voices? Does our study of Christianity reflect the authentic experience of Britain's black-led churches? Are religious people presented as white anti-slavery heroes, or are black voices included? Why did the retirement of Archbishop John Sentamu reduce the number of senior black Bishops in the Church of England to zero? How are Jewish voices speaking about Jewish religion heard in considering Nazi racism? A hundred more similar questions need to be asked and answered about our RE curriculum choices. Moving towards a decolonised RE curriculum seems a slow process, but positive steps can be taken with all age groups in any school.

11. Intersectionality

This way of looking at the impacts of prejudice and discrimination pays attention to the multiple damage done to people's life chances by the layers of disadvantage that come from racism, sexism, poverty and other marginalising social forces, prejudices and discriminatory structures. A person may inhabit several intersecting identities, meaning they are impacted by a number of sources of social injustice and human rights issues. If a person's life chances are diminished by being black in a particular society, and also by their being female, or LGBT+, then people who identify with a number of these categories may experience multiple layers of discrimination and disadvantage. Those who seek liberation from racism or sexism or homophobia may have common cause in socio-political programmes seeking greater equality. The social processes of marginalisation, exclusion and discrimination may function in similar ways in relation to race, or gender, or sexual orientation, or indeed religious identity. When a teacher of RE wants to study racism in the context of inequality, then an intersectional approach is important because it enables the study to be set in a broad framework of learning about human liberation. Contemporary feminism, critical race theory and queer theory all use the concept of intersectionality to analyse how prejudice and discrimination arise, function and are perpetuated. Good teaching of RE will be informed and challenged by these insights.

12. The significance of BAME voices

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic voices deserve and need to be heard in debates about racism. This terminology remains – rightly – contested, and open to improvement, but is current in 2020. One way that racism flourishes is that powerful white people get to



define the debate (including, for instance, in naming or categorising the less powerful). Listening to the experience of being marginalised or being a victim of racism is an essential condition for a proper understanding of the impact of racist attitudes and institutions. It's also vital that *BAME* voices are heard in debates about responding to racism and creating more hopeful and equal futures – can your school set up a structure for listening to your pupils from ethnic minorities? When choosing resources for RE it is obviously good to use material about race that comes from people who have experienced racism, not from perpetrators of racism. In the classroom teachers of RE need to handle opportunities for shared self-expression with great care and sensitivity and establish ground rules for 'safe space' discussion that enable pupils experiences - especially in this context - experiences of racism, to be heard. Of course, even the use of this recently - contemporary acronym '*BAME*' can easily slip into another kind of marginalising and othering: our RE resources need to keep listening to voices from communities which experience racism about the best contemporary language to use in describing varied identities. This descriptive language remains fluid, contested and open to improvement.

13. **Legacies of slavery (including within religions)**

Historical memory is selective. It is not a simple matter for anyone to observe, weigh realistically and judge justly how their ancestors might be complicit in racism, so it often happens that historic racism from 'within my community' is hidden and suppressed. An honest part of developing an anti-racist vision of our contemporary society involves 'facing history, and ourselves.' This has a particular dimension in religion. Christians enjoy stories of Wesley, Newton and Wilberforce working against slavery, seeing their gospel enacted by these champions of social reform. But the complicity of Christians in the enslavement of millions is often an untold story, and the legacies of contempt and oppression for black people in 'white' society is neither confronted nor dealt with because of the sugar coating of Christian history and values. In RE, teachers must be willing to hear some unusual and challenging voices and perspectives which name realistically the legacies of slavery and the complicity of the religious in this. Various religions are sullied by their associations with slavery, but in 21st century Britain, it is the Atlantic slave trade that leaves a shameful stain upon Christianity, and which has a legacy today that should not be ignored.

14. **Dangerous conversations in safe spaces**

This important idea in education says that young peoples' attitudes to race – including prejudice internalised from growing up in a racist society – are not effectively challenged and will not begin to be changed unless they can express them, and explore them honestly. Sometimes in dialogue designed to promote racial equality young people don't say what they really think because they feel it is unsafe to express prejudice (the phrase 'I'm not racist, but...' is often used). From the political right, this is the criticism that 'political correctness' prevents honest conversation. Prof Ted Cattle offers the idea that schools should be 'safe space for dangerous conversation': learners need to be able to be open about the ideas they hold or have heard. The conversation may be dangerous because it involves genuine confrontation of prejudice, facing the challenges of equality,



changing attitudes and behaviour. It is also important to be aware of how unsafe it can feel for black or ethnic minority learners to talk about and understand their own experience of racism: they need classrooms and schools to be safe spaces too. Teachers of RE are often good at handling classroom controversy. There are times when being even-handed is important as a teacher, but also when confronting racism and fighting prejudice - with information, argument, and persistence – is required. In RE, teachers may benefit their pupils' deeper learning by consciously creating safe spaces for dangerous conversation about race and racism.

15. **Multiple perspectives**

Good RE is always alert to the fact that religions seek the truth in uncertain fields. When considering questions about race and racism, as with all ethical controversies, RE must be open to different views. While hate speech and the language of prejudice are rightly not allowed in classroom discussion, it is a staple of good RE that the point of learning is not to establish a party line or a 'politically correct' position from which deviation is not permitted. Good education, including good RE, is open to multiple perspectives in describing and analysing the causes of racism and the appropriate strategies for combatting racism. Of course, teachers have a special responsibility for making sure that the marginal voices, the perspectives of the outsiders, are clearly heard, alongside dominant opinions and received wisdom. Here it may be helpful for teachers of RE to remember that 'dialogues of difference' are pretty close to the centre of RE's learning intentions and pedagogic methods. For example, it is not surprising, but rather to be welcomed that Jewish, Muslim, Christian and atheist voices may have different things to say about examples of racism in 20th century Europe. And while to the goals of anti-racist education might ultimately be mutual esteem, harmony and justice, steps in the right direction can move from tolerance to acceptance and respect.

16. **Whiteness**

It's important to engage with the idea that racism is a problem for white people, rather than for black people. This doesn't mean all white people are racists, or are complicit in racism, or are 'part of the problem.' This idea requires thinkers to consider whiteness as a constructed category: ethnic identities for 'white' people are socially constructed, as they are for other ethnic groupings. Recent decades have seen increasing studies of whiteness as an ethnic identity, sometimes linked by critical race theorists to the marginalisation of all non-white identities by white hegemony and to the politics of white supremacists. Consider the idea that white people are the perpetrators of racism: Nelson Mandela: "No one is born hating another person because of the colour of their skin, or their background, or their religion." Teachers of RE often draw upon global examples of religious identity (and should attend to the balance of ethnicities in the RE curriculum): how can balance in curriculum planning be achieved? Not by studying only white 'heroes' or 'white saviours'. Teaching might consider with pupils the idea that black people do not need white people to 'come and save them' so much as they need white people to stop oppressing them. Curriculum balance requires the inclusion of thinking about being white in the work done in RE on race. It is interesting, and perhaps



salutory, to consider that, in the origins of Christianity, Pontius Pilate seems to be the main European in the Gospel narratives.

17. **White privilege**

This refers to the benefits which a society gives to white people, but not to black and other ethnic minority people, because of their skin colour. These privileges, often invisible to those who benefit from them, come from the positioning of white as normative and non-white as marginal, and from passive advantages which society accords to people because of their whiteness. These advantages may include cultural affirmation of your own value as a person, presumed high social status and presumptions of safety or entitlement to freedom of choice in regard to work, relationships, movement, policing and freedom to speak. Effects of white privilege can be seen in statistics which evidence professional, educational and social inequalities between white people and others in a society. Teachers of RE, being alert to this sometimes invisible set of advantages, might explore with pupils how fairness and justice can be established in societies where racial inequality and injustice has featured for decades or centuries.

18. **Unconscious bias**

It is common for a person's background, personal experiences, social stereotypes and cultural context to impact on their attitudes, decisions and actions without the person being conscious of this impact, without realising the ways our position in society affects our behaviour. This kind of unconscious bias, also called implicit bias, can happen through the fast initial judgments and assessments of people and situations which we make presumptuously all the time. We may often be unaware of these biases and their implications. The challenge for teachers is: how can I address my bias if it is unconscious? Unconscious bias can have a very negative impact on people who are marginal in any community. Teachers of RE often care passionately about enabling pupils to 'see the other' or to 'appreciate difference'. A core process of RE learning involves dialogues of difference. So a special responsibility might rest upon us as teachers of RE to enable pupils to see their own implicit or unconscious biases and to consider what fairness and justice require of us in our plural communities. Equity training, designed to build awareness and action for justice, is a powerful way of responding to unconscious bias.

19. **'Punching up / punching down'**

This is a rather colloquial term for this glossary, but it is very useful in explaining to pupils why education needs to focus on people who are marginal or the excluded, those who are threatened by racism. Teachers of RE can explain to their pupils that people who already have power and influence sometimes make things worse for those on the margins by 'punching down'. Protestors who want a change towards justice in the way a society treats black, Asian, and other ethnic minority people might be seen to be 'punching up'. It's a metaphor, not a justification for actual punching (!), but it also explains why racist comedy, for example, is so damaging and painful, and why it is worth asking about a comic: which way is s/he punching?' In RE, there are numerous examples



of protest, rebellion and uprising from oppressed people, perhaps few more notable than the slaves of Egypt, liberated in the stories of Moses. An interpretive activity using this story might ask: who punched down? Who punched up? RE might benefit from explorations of the impact of this foundational story in communities victimised by racism, from Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks and Bob Marley to the liberation theologians and base Christian communities of Latin America.

20. **Fundamental British values of tolerance and respect**

The requirement upon schools to promote 5 values was introduced into our inspection frameworks in 2015. Controversial from the start, these values are tolerance, respect, individual liberty, democracy, and the rule of law. A key part of RE's engagement with social, political and ethical questions is to equip learners to 'question the answer' as well as to 'answer the questions' so students should expect to be able to consider whether these values and their place in schools, religions and society contribute to more or less racial justice. The prominence given to these 5 values is of course a matter of political choice, and the ways in which pupils are invited to consider them should in RE certainly include giving place to black voices and experiences with regard to how well our society enacts these values in the justice system, in education and in our religious community lives as well.

21. **Cultural appropriation**

Racism is sometimes expressed where dominant cultures assume the cultural inferiority of others or assume that the mainstream culture has some entitlement to helping itself to the culture of marginal groups or communities. In this context, appropriation refers to the action of using or claiming ownership of things from a culture that is not your own without showing much understanding or respect for that culture. Did white rock'n'rollers appropriate black music? What legitimises white rappers who appropriate the music and experience of black communities? There are hundreds of examples. In RE, teachers will want to exercise special care in the ways they 'use' the cultural – and spiritual – treasures of the communities they study: what will prevent our use of religious artefacts from being an example of appropriation? Why might it be a bad idea to get pupils to 'try out' cultural items from minority religious communities? How can teaching avoid exoticising or othering religious materials, and promote profound dialogue between communities instead?

22. **Microaggression**

A microaggression is an example of a covert form of racism which is often dismissed by white people as 'just a joke' or with a phrase like 'I didn't mean anything by that' but which is experienced by black people as a cumulative reinforcement of white power through put-downs, jokes, ignorance and marginalisation. These are often examples of unconscious bias: the white person's unwillingness to get someone's name right, or to accept the practices of dress, food or family life in minority communities leads to commentary on the 'otherness of non-whites' which is made up of numerous small signals that white is normal and black is less than normal. The term is used in describing sexist behaviour as well, as in the well-known examples of 'everyday sexism.' In teaching



RE, teachers will need to check their own privilege around these kinds of areas, and seek to present human diversity positively with increasing skill. RE also needs curriculum resources which are positive about diversity at a deep level, and which recognise and challenge racist microaggression whenever it appears.

