

Books

3.4

Activity to support schools addressing the question: 'Are we sufficiently aware of what high quality books appropriate to RE are becoming available?'

Primary school activity

Through entering a competition related to RE and community cohesion, your school has just won £100 to spend on additional books to use in RE. Look at the following reviews of (fictitious) recently published books and decide which ones you would buy, and then justify this decision.

Reuben Visits Jerusalem (Key Stage 2), 50pp, £7.99

This book pictures and tells the story of an eleven-year-old British Jewish boy and his family going on his first trip to Jerusalem. Sumptuously illustrated, it gives information and atmosphere about British Jewish life and connections to the land of Israel in both historic and contemporary ways (there's a section on the history behind the Hanukkah story, and one on the Western Wall and prayer today). There are some brief, but well thought-out research activities at the end of each of the five chapters, suited to pupils 9–11 years of age. It's a shame that the text about the politics between Israel and Palestine is not just uncritical, but also makes some unbalanced (to this reviewer) assumptions about the Palestinians' situation.

'Why? Why? Why?': A Day in the Life of a Six-Year-Old (Key Stage 1), 30pp, £6.99

This book provides a number of lovely dialogues based on questions asked by a six-year-old. Older brothers and sisters, parents, teachers and the vicar at the child's church are the other speakers. They could be read aloud to the class. Good humoured, and moving between the amusing and profound, the dialogues are illustrated with simple nicely drawn cartoons (e.g. where Bethany (the six-year-old) asks 'What is heaven like? Do they have ice cream every day?' there is a cartoon of an ice cream van swinging past Pearly Gates). This approach could be whimsical, or twee, but some of the questions the girl asks are about life's darker parts, and all are handled with good sense, more questions and diverse ideas.

Teachers could model good practice in Key Stage 1 explorations through this book, and RE would be the better for it. Some teachers are so short of confidence in RE that they avoid the kind of big questions Bethany keeps asking. The book should show such teachers ways forward that don't assume the teacher knows everything. It is good to see a publisher providing challenging resources in the area of ultimate questions, a part of RE that many teachers struggle to present to younger pupils.

Books

3.4 (Continued)

Let's Visit a Church (Key Stage 1), 30pp, £6.50

Here's a book with some good ideas in a good-value package. This well-put-together and illustrated book of A4 size includes eight pages that can be copied for your class's church visit – and they are worth copying! Instead of dull fill-in sheets or wretched word searches, the copiable sheets provide ways for seven-year-olds to really look hard, ask questions and enquire for themselves during a church visit.

The other pages give a well-argued rationale for visiting church buildings – and communities – with an emphasis on meeting people, not just 'drawing the font'. The black-and-white line drawings – also copiable – are helpfully linked in to literacy activities in the Year 2 curriculum for England, such as recounts, responding to traditional stories, lists and labelling and non-fiction texts. Many primary classes go to visit a church: this pack will give you fresh ways of making the most of the visit, and lots of the ideas (though not the copiable items) would make for successful visits to a mosque or synagogue as well.

Festivals of Light: Channukah, Divali and Christmas (Key Stage 2), 60pp, £6.50

This book gives basic information and ideas about three festivals from three different religions. The parallels between these three celebrations with regard to the similarities and symbolism of light they make are useful, but more on the distinctiveness of each religion might also have been good. The children's accounts of what it is like to be a young Jew, Hindu or Christian, celebrating in Britain today, are as much about the emotions and feelings of celebration in family and community as they are about remembered story, or specific activities of worship.

Some of the activities are very simple – is it really OK to ask pupils in Year 5 to make a Divali card? If you do, why give them words to copy – could they not make up their own greetings? Others have a little more challenge: 'Make a list of what the three festivals have in common. Create a tri-ologue between the three children from different religions, in which they talk about the similarities between their festivals, and role play this to your class'. Key Stage 2 teaching about festivals needs to get beyond the basic facts and stories, to begin to develop pupils' own understanding, and ability to explain the impact of religion. This book will take you a few steps in the right direction, but then it falters.

Books

3.4 (Continued)

Telling Pictures: Religious Images from Britain Today (Key Stage 2), 80pp, £12.50

This picture pack consists of an 80-page information book and 24 photo cards, the images coming from the community life of six different religions. The photos are of variable quality: the best are breathtaking images of street celebrations of Divali and of Easter. The worst are rather dull empty interiors of religious buildings. The cards are blank on the back. The six sections, one on each religion, are large print, but the text isn't suitable for 7–11s to read – it feels more like the kind of information a teacher might be grateful for if they were poorly prepared for teaching a unit of work on the particular religion.

There are four pages at the end of the book about using the photographs and these suggest six different strategies for visual learning. These strategies are clearly written, but quite basic (e.g. 'Pin the pictures round the classroom on the wall and ask pupils to look for the following: signs and symbols, lights, sacred writings, food, special clothes'). It may be helpful to have this written down, but many teachers will have strategies of their own at least as good as these. Criticisms of the pack should not mask the fact that RE does need more visual learning resources, and at least here a teacher can find some, ready to use.

Illustrated Dictionary of Religions (Key Stage 1–2), 100pp, £10.00

This dictionary, which is simply written and well illustrated, includes about 400 short entries that cover the 'six principal religions'. It is excellent value because it comes with a disk of the text that could be run on a number of screens at once. The information is written so that 7–11s will understand it, but it could not really be said to be very useful in Key Stage 1. The entries are descriptive, and cross-referenced and indexed simply and well – in this, it is a model of information-giving through a book on religion. I like the fact that it includes many religion-specific entries, but also lots that refer to religious practice in a plural way.

For example, if you look up 'Murti', the entry has a picture of the goddess Lakshmi, and begins by saying 'A murti is a statue or image of one of the Hindu gods or goddesses. You might find one in a Hindu temple or mandir, or a Hindu home'. If you look up 'singing' then there are two photos of people singing, one wearing Jewish dress, one a female vicar. The entry says 'Religions often make and use songs to worship, or show their love for God. Religious music might be serious or joyful, solo or for a choir, classical or rock'. These kinds of simple description have clearly been written to open minds rather than to give closed definitions. It's a good reference source – and some teachers, as well as many pupils, will find it gives confidence in handling faith traditions they wish they knew better.

Books

3.4 (Continued)

Secondary school activity

Through entering in a competition related to RE and community cohesion, your school has just won £150 to spend on additional RE books to be placed in the school library. Look at the following reviews of (fictitious) recently published books and decide which ones you would buy and then justify this decision.

Living as a Muslim in Britain Today (Key Stage 3), 75pp, £7.99

Through concisely edited and therefore brief interviews with Muslims, and commentary on interesting photographs, this resource provides real insights into the subject, with useful comments on the growth of Islam in Britain. It covers some expected territory – the Five Pillars, life at the mosque, the celebration of Id ul Fitr and aspects of Muslim social teaching on marriage and divorce, Islamic dress (for women) and participation in interfaith activity. The aims of the book are obviously to inform the learner about Islam, and to encourage respect for all, but the pedagogy behind this is not very clear – the information is good, but the possibilities of transformation are limited. In a resource that claims to be about Britain, it's a shame that all the interviews and pictures are English, and almost all are from London. A teacher might use this book to build a course, but it is not itself a course – the 'activities' suggested at the end of each section are rarely more than information gathering and processing.

Growing Up in a Mixed-Faith Family (Key Stages 4–5), 89pp, £8.00

This book reports research into five different examples of mixed-faith childhoods in Britain today, and makes fascinating reading. The religions covered include Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Sikhism, and one family is a 'mixture' of an atheist husband whose wife is a Methodist minister. The scholarly background is clear, and the quality of the thinking that has led to the book is exceptionally well retold in the stories of the families, which are gripping. We have a compelling example of how a 15-year-old copes with the death of his grandparent, and learns about Muslim and Christian visions of the next life, finding comfort in both. And in another story, a Buddhist and a Sikh parent describe their pride in their daughter, who describes herself as 'spiritual in two ways at once'.

The quality of the writing, aimed at 15-year-olds, is what makes this an outstanding resource. If a teacher of RE was worried about whether this material is close to the heart of GCSE study or not, then they should not be – as to pick up and read these stories will be a deeply educative experience for any 15-year-old, encouraging them to reflect on the ways their own life is a mixture of ideas as well. Brilliant, and not as hard to use as it initially looks.

Books

3.4 (Continued)

Religion and the Media: A GCSE Guide (Key Stage 4), 100pp, £7.50

Since one of the awarding bodies for GCSE has woven a media strand into all of its units recently, and as many RE teachers use film, YouTube and other media sources for learning on a weekly basis, this is a welcome area of learning to be opened up. This resource pack does a good job, showing many ways to use film and video clips to energise GCSE RS learning in relation to Christianity. The learning strategies, at the heart of the pack, are often illustrated with precise reference to two or more movies, or soap episodes (some of which can be accessed on the i-Player). This is the best feature of the pack, as they will take any RE teacher beyond 'showing a clip and discussing it' through good group work and apposite connections to the syllabuses. I had not thought of how 'Kick Ass' links to moral decision-making about violence until I read the good section in this book on conflict.

I liked the way the GCSE themes are linked to New Testament scriptural teaching, always trying to draw out the principles in the text. Too often, GCSE teaching is hardly connected to the gospels or Saint Paul at all – this set of ideas makes the link. I also liked the way the authors have given a rounded and comprehensive picture of issues, not just a stereotype of Christian conviction. The main weakness of the pack is that it concentrates, sometimes too narrowly, on one vision of Christianity.

Interacting with the Local Community: Ideas to Enliven RE and Community Cohesion (Key Stages 3–5), 80pp, £8.99

This lively book contains seven case studies of how secondary schools have used local religious communities to build the kind of attitudes that promote cohesive communities. They feel realistic, but ambitious: one involves sending six groups of Year 11 GCSE RE students to six different places of worship, and the groups provide peer education to Year 8 pupils about the four religions involved (three of the buildings were varied churches). Another example, in an 'all white' school, explored the idea of 'Britishness' by looking at 'British Christianity', 'British Islam', 'British Jewish identity' and 'non-religious ways of life in Britain'. This kind of focus on contemporary and local religion sounds compelling and has a powerful connection to the Community Cohesion agenda.

The activities and case studies described relate to 11–19-year-olds in different ways, and assume well-established RE departments, with budgets and good staff – not an assumption that is reality everywhere. The last three chapters offer an evaluative framework and a planning guide to help readers innovate better practice, and a useful checklist of what inspectors look for when they look at cohesion issues. The book is a good read for teachers, rather than being useful for pupils directly (the cover is a bit misleading here). I suppose some teachers might read it all and react wistfully: 'I wish I worked in one of these schools.' A reaction as ambitious as the book would be, 'Well, it will be hard work, but now I have plenty of ideas that can happen in any school – even my own'.

Books

3.4 (Continued)

Science and Religion: Exploring the Connections (Key Stages 3–4), 120pp, £8.50

This is a pupil textbook on a single topic and, as such, many teachers will feel it is too expensive to buy a class set – but you won't waste your money if you do. There's a reduction that means you can buy ten copies for £50. The book approaches questions of meaning and truth: Why are we here? Where do we come from? How do we know? It's as much a philosophical book as a religious one, and tackles science questions that don't usually occur until AS level in the science classroom – but with 14-year-olds in mind. The lucid sections of short text, the brilliant photos and the wacky, genuinely funny cartoons will appeal to 13/14-year-olds. The book gives space to the views of creationists, proponents of intelligent design, guided evolutionists and those who believe the whole universe is an accident without a mind behind it. Pithy sayings are scattered through the text: 'I'm a scientist and a Christian, but that doesn't make me schizophrenic', 'I used to believe in god, but now I think I'm an accident, which is weird, because I seem to be a clever and rational *accident*.'

Research – cleverly used in pupil guessing-games in the text – shows that many students become agnostic or atheist not because they understand the claims of science and the attack on religion it can represent, but because they misunderstand both religion and science. RE has a job to do here; this textbook asks young people to be reasonable about religion and reasonable about science as they develop their own ideas more deeply. It's riveting stuff.

The Holocaust: Survivors' Stories (Key Stages 3–4), 130pp, £10.00

This large-format quality photographic book tells the stories of twelve survivors of the Nazi attempt at genocide against the Jewish people, and of attacks on other groups as well. Most of the survivors experienced the concentration camps. Most have stories of inhuman conditions and vicious treatment, but all are also sharing the experience of survival, and what it has meant. Two became atheists because of the camps. Three others deepened their vision of the Eternal, and express their faith movingly. One is a gay Christian who says 'My loneliness as a gay person has been worse since 1945 than it was in the camps. I feel my whole life is about loneliness. But God is with me.'

The book will be a precious resource for extracts and stories for the RE teacher, because it takes an essentially spiritual and philosophical approach to the stories. This avoids the mistake of some Holocaust study materials of majoring on the shocking nature of the Nazi intentions and actions. Jewish people here appear as those with a tradition, community and sense of rage – they are not passive victims. They question God, and they fight the Nazis. The common cry that the genocide should never be forgotten finds compelling reason in this book, which might make you – or your pupils – weep, but might also make you ask 'What would I have done?' 'Why did the ordinary people allow it?' and 'How can we stop it from ever happening again?'