

'Religious Illiteracy'

At a time when religious extremism, violence and persecution are globally on the increase, you might have thought that the 'powers that be' would want to do everything they could to promote a greater understanding of different religious and philosophical beliefs. Ignorance can all too easily provide a seedbed for prejudice and fear, and prejudice and fear can in turn undermine the very fabric of our society.

Religious illiteracy is dangerous, yet it is often ignored or left unaddressed. It is worrying how minimal religious education has become in many of our Secondary Schools. Even where the legal requirements are met and it has remained on the timetable, it is often taught by non-specialists (who may unwittingly fuel misunderstanding), or absorbed into a purely secular course on 'citizenship' where it is reduced to a vague investigation of moral issues.

Some of us look to the BBC as a public service broadcaster to play a central role in promoting religious understanding and respect, but doubts have been expressed as to whether it can effectively do this. Earlier in the year the BBC executive, Lisa Opie, told staff that having out-sourced the flagship programme *Songs of Praise*, the BBC would "no longer have a permanent Religion and Ethics department in Salford." Roger Bolton, a well-known presenter of BBC 4's *Sunday* programme and former independent producer, was scathing in his comments about the decision. It was "an accident waiting to happen," he wrote.

"The Corporation has no head no head of religion, no religious news editor (unlike almost every other area such as sport, economics and the arts), and a predominantly young workforce, which is more liberal and secular than the rest of the country. It is dangerously out of touch, not least with immigrant communities, whose faith is central to their lives."

Not all religion is good, but not all is bad either. The Israelites happily incorporated ideas from Canaanite and Egyptian religions which were helpful and appropriate (The study of ancient non-biblical texts has shown this). They recognised the truth and goodness contained within them and also failings amongst themselves. The prophets for example frequently condemned not only false and corrupt beliefs and practices in other religions such as that of the sexually licentious fertility cult of Baal, but also people within their own society who exploited the poor whilst hiding behind a thin veneer of religiosity (Isa.1:12-17, etc). You and I live in a multi-cultural society, and we have a duty to encourage and promote religious literacy – the ability to distinguish 'good' from 'bad' religion. Our own Archbishop, Justin Welby, provides an excellent role model. At a meeting in October 2015 to mark the 10th anniversary of the opening of an Islamic Centre in Cardiff, he spoke for example about the need for people of different faiths to stand together against extremism:

"Darkness is cast out by the light of truth and love," he said. "We have unequivocally to condemn those who misuse our own Scriptures for their own ends. But condemnation, a negative, is not enough. The mainstream of each faith needs to generate a counter-narrative that acknowledges our differences and commits to resource and support one another in defiance of those who wish to divide us. The counter-narrative must be so exciting and so beautiful that it defeats the radicalisers with their message of hate and despair. We are called to be actively involved in our society not for our own good but for the common good..."