

opportunities of presenting through online platforms.

In May, already three events have taken place, including one I was involved with, on the theme of the religious literacy project. There will be more nationally, and more in Hampshire too.

Please let us know what areas of religious education research you would value the opportunity to explore together through virtual platforms. These are exciting times to be involved with RE. Let's make the most of this.

Patricia Hannam

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The religious education of the future

We were delighted to be able to welcome Alastair McIntosh as a theologian, thinker and writer to speak with us at our conference in October 2019, on the religious education of the future. Alastair invited us to rethink what it is that religion in education could achieve. Here he helps us to think deeply, at this very strange time in history, about religion in RE. We commend Alastair's piece, based on the talk, to you.



In the opening paragraph of one of his essays, the great Indian-Catalan and Hindu-Christian theologian, Raimon Panikkar, said that the question of the religion of the future “*belongs to prophecy*”, and “*is based on an intense reading of the signs of the times.*”

Ponder those words. Much of religious education is about the practices and beliefs of world faiths. But what about the deeper process of equipping the next generation to navigate the inner life? That, both individually, and in its collective expressions in our times? Such is the question that I would like to share here.

When Patricia Hannam invited me to speak at your conference for Hampshire County Council secondary RE teachers last year, few people apart from those such as scenario planners at the World Health Organisation (WHO) would have anticipated where we might be today. I do not mean that the WHO predicted this specific

coronavirus. But since 2005, the pandemic section of their website, albeit speaking in the context of influenza, has hosted a warning that the experts agree that another pandemic is likely. They said that they were unable to say when, but even on conservative scenarios it could kill many millions “*within a very short period.*”

The world may have been caught unawares by Covid-19, but not its viral epidemiologists. Whether anybody was listening was another matter. And we might note in passing that while there is no evidence that the coronavirus was caused by climate change, it does represent a crisis enfolded within the much wider emergent crisis of our times. As such, it is a wake-up call to examine both the outer life and inner life aspects of human resilience.

You are teachers - not of outworn notions of *religious instruction*, but of *religious education*. You will know that prophecy, properly understood, is not about predicting the future in the narrow sense that people usually apply the term. It is not about trying to second guess the job of a scientific body like the WHO, or the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). And if I might set Panikkarji's “*intense reading*” in its context, drawn from Matthew's gospel (16:1-4), neither is it about reading signs in the sky, as if prophecy were a display of magical divination.

Rather, Jesus speaks of reading “*the signs of the times*”. Moreover, this is not limited to a prophetic jeremiad of saying what is wrong with the world. Any person with a gripe can point to what is wrong with the world. But to point to what can put things right – and as the poet Adrienne Rich has it, to point to that which “*with no extraordinary power, reconstitute[s] the world*” - that is quite another matter.

Notice how Jesus speaks of reading the signs explicitly as being “*the sign of the prophet*

Jonah. What might be going on there? Jonah, whose story is laid out so richly in the Hebrew scriptures of the Jewish faith, is venerated in all three Abrahamic traditions. The Qur'an's version also tells of his sojourn in the belly of the fish or whale – tossed around, as we might interpret it, in the whirlpool forces of the unconscious psyche. There he would have languished, we're told in the surah As-Saaffat, "till the Day of Resurrection" had he not been set free again to resume his God-given calling (37:139-148). For this reason, in the Christian tradition, he is understood to be a symbol of resurrection.

To deepen to a spirituality that can enable a reading of the times is, as Panikkarji could so clearly see, the deep work of our age and that to which we are invited. "Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!" said Moses (Numbers 11:29) in the Protestants' version from King James – and okay, we might need to use a blander modern translation – but there used to be a school textbook called *Physics is fun*, and sometimes the Shakespearian era's crack of theological thunder can be fun too.

Now, I am not a Roman Catholic, but when Pope John XXIII – *Good Pope John* - crafted his great encyclical of 1963, *Pacem in Terris*, "Peace on Earth", not for nothing did he title the section on peace-making, "Signs of the times". The official translations into English vary according to whether they are taken from the Italian (as with the Vatican Press version) or from the official Latin (as with the Vatican website version). But if I might mix the two for maximum poetic effect, he speaks of "the terrible destructive force of modern arms" - nuclear weapons in particular - and that such signs of these times must incite us to overcome "the law of fear" and to replace it with the "reign" of love; a settlement based, he specifies, upon the skills of both negotiation and collaboration.

The application to poverty, to climate change, to the loneliness and many losses of those affected by Covid-19 or a host of other afflictions that confront "all people that on earth do dwell" (as the Psalm sung to the Old 100th has

it) will be self-evident. We are, as the encyclical goes on to say, to be "a spark of light", "a vivifying leaven" and even, "a nucleus of love". We will be so "in proportion to [our] degree of spiritual union with God."

How might we teach all that in our religious education? It is not for me to double guess your own profession. But children remember teachers who impacted on their lives. Teachers who saw them as persons. The ones who helped them to start on their long journeys of self-realisation of that spark of God within. And with it, who edged open the perceptual acuity of the heart to see and to respond to the signs emergent in their times. "Not fare well, but fare forward, voyagers", as T S Eliot's *Four Quartets* so awesomely summarises the karma yoga of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

In all of this what is less well understood, and perhaps so out of professional modesty, is the person of the teacher in such truly educative process. I mean by that your quality of being, of comportment, of bearing, of carrying a presence that touches on the reality of the divine, the realm that resides beyond ego.

I would therefore put it to you, that beyond the word but in the spirit of the job description, your task is to help your students to see with eyes both outer and inner in the dynamics of their world today. That is, to teach discernment. To break through the idolatries of maya as illusion. To transcend materialism, particularly spiritual materialism. To face the Noble Truth of Buddhism that suffering is real, but not to be ensnared in it. And to cultivate the inner centredness that is the Good Pope's "nucleus of love", that radiates a spiritual intelligence.

A prophetic spirituality is neither intellectual abstraction, nor wacky woo woo. A prophetic calling is to read and bear the Spirit's witness to the signs of the times, right here and now.

This is why our teaching life cannot be separated from our spiritual life. Our teaching thereby becomes a form of prayer, an active meditation, even when (and especially when) we might be engaged with difficult institutional

situations and challenging colleagues or children.

Where might we look, in our everyday professional lives, to find the signs of the times? In the Sanskrit scriptures, the word *upanishad* means both a spiritual treatise and "to sit at the feet". Look, and you will find them all around you! In part at least, those we teach are bearers of the signs. Ask not just "What did you do?", but as the child psychologists will these days advise us, "What happened to you?" Read your pupils and, inasmuch as it is professionally appropriate, help them to read themselves and what is all around.

In Plato's account, Socrates learned his pedagogy from Diotima of Mantinea. She made him realise that, like his own mother's profession as a *maia* or midwife, the educator's task is giving birth – the practice of *maieutics*. And there we have it. An "intense reading" of "the signs of the times" becomes a leading out. A form of birth. And even in dark times, a path of resurrection.

Alistair McIntosh biography



Alastair McIntosh is a regular broadcast of BBC Radio Scotland's Thought for the Day and an honorary professor at the University of Glasgow. From 1977 to 1979 he was with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) as deputy headmaster of St Peter's Extension School in the Gulf Province of Papua New Guinea. His most recent book is the spiritual journey, Poacher's pilgrimage (Birlinn), and his next will be Riders on the storm: climate change and the survival of being (Birlinn, due August). With the Leeds RE teacher Matt Carmichael, he is also the co-author of Spiritual activism: leadership as service (Green Books).