**Critique and counter-critique of the Understanding Christianity approach to RE**

Objections to the Understanding Christianity approach to RE from Alex Howard, Humanist are printed in black text

Responses from Derek Holloway, Church of England are printed in blue

First I am very grateful to Alex for submitting this paper. It will be a useful opportunity to help SWARE colleagues not already familiar with Understanding Christainity to grasp its scope and purpose. I will address individual concerns below but if I may a couple of points.

1. Understanding Christainity(UC) is a **resource not a curriculum.** Any school (church or community) just teaching UC would be failing, in my view, to be providing a balanced curriculum. As a resource it is expected that teachers will use their professional judgement is selecting and adapting activities to suit their context.
2. Understanding Christainity is a resource funded by CSTG, the Jerusalem Trust and the Sir Halley Stewart Trust. It was commissioned and managed by the Church of England Education office but written by RE Today and its team of multi faith and non-faith RE advisers.
3. Much of this paper relies on the comments and views of Alan Brine. I have personally a lot of respect for Alan and his contribution toward RE over the years. His views are always helpful and provocative. However, it should be remembered that he is now a representative of the BHA on many RE bodies and as such he is often writing from a particular viewpoint. He will also readily accept that he had not seen the full resource at the time of writing the comments quoted below

As colleagues are aware, Sacre has adopted *RE Today’s* Agreed Syllabus. You may also know that *RE Today* has, this year, written an additional course “Understanding Christianity”. The “Understanding Christianity” course is not a part of the Agreed Syllabus and has to be paid for separately. **I propose that Sacres should neither endorse nor recommend this course.**

*That is entirely a matter for a SACRE and is an approach that could be fairly used for all resources that support RE i.e. Understanding Humanism to which perhaps Alex might like to apply the same test.*

**because its approach is inconsistent with the Religious Education Council Practice Code for teachers of RE.** *This comment**is ill informed an inappropriate. The Church of England is a signatory to the code of practice and would refute this completely. The code of practice is about teacher practice and behaviour not about resources and curriculum so its use here is unhelpful and misleading.*

*I believe that there is nothing in this resource that doesn’t encourage teachers to respect people’s beliefs; it encourages and values reason-giving. It treats others as they would wish to be treated, it accepts contestability and is self-aware, it is open, it promotes a fair and accurate representation of the belief under study, it is balanced. It is open to debate and hard questions and in dealing with controversial issues about Christianity.*

I invite colleagues to examine the course for themselves: *I happily echo that sentiment*

and consider the following as evidence

The ‘Understanding Christianity’ handbook refers to the notion of ‘thinking theologically’ as being at the core of the course. What is the difference between ‘thinking theologically’ and thinking critically/dispassionately/objectively?  One surely cannot think critically about religion if one strips out sociological, psychological, historical and philosophical perspectives on religion? *This is current debate in RE see* <http://www.reonline.org.uk/news/revision-rethinking-re-a-conversation-about-religious-and-theological-literacy/>

Yet this is precisely what “Understanding Christianity” does, and it is quite explicit about it:

*“It is not offering a philosophical or sociological approach to RE: it addresses some philosophical, sociological and psychological questions, but its focus is on an exploration of Christian theology.”*

*You might want to re-read that sentence*! *it addresses some philosophical, sociological and psychological questions so that is not excluded from the resource and again it is worth pointing out it is a resource not a curriculum.*

However, shorn of its context, it is not possible to understand Christianity at all.

As Alan Brine observes:

*Alan’s views are always stimulating, provocative and helpful but they are his views (see above). I would want to add that in this Alan is taking a narrow definition of Theology here and one that wouldn’t be recognised as reflecting the scope of theology as understood in many British Universities today. In the blog Alan solely quotes Stephen Prothero: An American theologian who comments on religion in America*

*Studying theology is something that goes on inside a religious community. Students of RE should be interested in this process as observers but cannot directly participate in it.*

<http://www.reonline.org.uk/news/alans-blog-thinking-theologically-in-re-part-1-alan-brine/>

Brine gives an example:  *Is there any point asking pupils to draw conclusions about the truth or meaning of the resurrection for themselves? Only the insider can do that.*

He adds: *Crucially what we are studying is the behaviour of Christians – we are not actually engaging in theology itself.*

Brine concludes: *It would be a major concern if attempts were made to distort learning in RE by structuring the whole study of Christianity around a series of theological concepts and processes.*

But that is exactly what “Understanding Christianity” sets out to do:

*“Pupils will encounter these concepts a number of times as they move through the school: God, Creation/fall, People of God, Prophecy, Wisdom, Kingdom of God, Incarnation, Gospel, Salvation”.*

*There is a considerable and live debate in RE about what constitutes a concept, what is being explored here are the key concepts that build up the prevailing Christian narrative as understood in most Anglican/non-conformist churches. If to study (by which in this context I mean know and understand) what believers actually believe is not appropriate in RE, then RE is not really a subject but a sub set of Sociology (i.e. the Sociology of Religion)*

*I am not going to comment in any detail on the next page or so. These are clearly Alex’s own views and he is entitled to them. I have no idea if he has seen the resource for himself, many SWARE members have and you are as well placed as I am to consider the value of this commentary.*

These core concepts, on their own, are not the concepts that would be required of an objective study. There is no mention of evidence, no mention of truth, or exploration of the nature of ‘faith’, no mention of knowledge and how it is obtained. There is no historical, psychological or sociological context. These are the concepts of a ‘faith school’ i.e. a school that, instead of saying, outright, they seek to convert pupils, demonstrates the bad faith of trying to convert while pretending to get people to ‘think critically’ (...but not *too* critically).

“Understanding Christianity” focuses on texts but without looking at what is known, and not known, about authorship, actual historical events, context and the (massive) influences of other religions on Christianity, which is, in so many fundamental ways, a clone of often-repeated themes from earlier belief systems.

‘Understanding Christianity’ *looks out through* a Christian perspective rather than *looking in on it*. It does not take the outsider’s test of faith; using the same sceptical and enquiring standard that would be applied to every other faith or belief system. It privileges the Christian perspective so as to undermine critical enquiry and independent thinking. It knows that it must not *indoctrinate* and so instead it seeks to *insinuate;* but with the aim of getting the same result. Yet such insinuation is duplicitous and unscrupulous, and therefore more objectionable, morally and intellectually, than indoctrination.

‘Understanding Christianity’ is designed to draw pupils *in* to Christianity, and *immerse* them in it, rather than to draw *out* the skill and capacity for critical thinking. And that, no doubt, explains why the Anglican Church is enthusiastic about supporting and funding this material. (we didn’t)

*At this point we seem to be drifting into non RE matters*

No one should be surprised: part of what it *means* to be a Christian is that one seeks, and is honour-bound, to pass on the ‘good news’ to all and sundry. I really can empathise. If I felt I had discovered ‘salvation’ I, too, would want everyone to know!

This impulse to missionary work is inevitable: Whenever anyone truly believes in a personal, redeeming God who, alone, provides meaning and salvation then, of course, they will want to bring Him into everyone's life. Hence the Anglican Church *..."wants to run a quarter of the 500 free schools the government has pledged will open before 2020.* (And seek taxpayers’ money for them!)

*Stephen Conway, the bishop of Ely, said: “This is a moment to be bold and ambitious, and offer … a Christian vision for education.”"*  (Guardian 10/7/16)

Christians seeking to promote ‘a Christian vision of education’ will, inevitably, want children to enquire from *within* their faith community, not from outside it. Hence ‘theological enquiry’. And so the course explicitly, and revealingly, reassures Christian readers that the materials were written by Christians. This does not reassure non-Christian readers. The project is driven by faith, yet the nature of faith is never critically examined or even highlighted.

‘Theological enquiry’ is what Christians are encouraged to do in order to work out what *sort* of *Christian* they are. They are given no space, (or minimal space), to conclude that they are not Christians at all. Hence ‘theological enquiry’ is not genuine and open-ended.

The Anglican Church, like all churches, is, as ever, focussed on surviving and maintaining numbers; missionary work, conversion, indoctrination (even though it is known that the word must never be used!). The Church also knows that it is in free-fall. The C of E Education blogosphere is full of concern about its fate, and full of excitement about ‘Understanding Christianity’. This course is part of the ‘fight-back’. It is a central component of the mission to renew and restore Christianity into young minds.

RE, as described by the Religious Education Council, is about the *examination* of beliefs, not the subtle *insinuation* of a particular belief. RE is not about providing a specifically Christian vision for education. *Absolutely agree see our statement of entitlement*

**The Church of England Education Department knows that, these days, it must be seen to be endorsing ‘critical enquiry’, but it also wants to produce more ‘believers’; more recruits to the ‘faith community’. These goals simply don’t go together.** *Not sure why this is in angry bold text but it is, of course, nonsense and frankly quite offensive and dis respectful.*

Examples from course materials: *It should be remembered that these quotes are taken form suggested activities, the resource is not a scheme of work. They have been selected out of longer paragraphs.*

*This is from a unit on Incarnation: This is taken from a starter activity. It is the second part of an activity about how people express difficult ideas where students will have first looked at art work by Damien Hurst, Salvador Dali and Pablo Picasso “KS3 Discuss why the Bible authors have used metaphors. Is it difficult to talk about God in concrete terms? Tell them some Christians believe that, when you talk about God, ‘everything you say is wrong’. What do they mean? How can Christians say that they know God?”*  This question presupposes that there *is a God* to be talked about (in *any* terms); that it is a coherent concept. And it privileges ‘belief’ over evidence. For there to be a course like this at all, privileging Christianity to such a degree, is to presuppose some kind of truth in Christianity.

*This is from a later section of the same unit. It is in one of the ‘making sense of text’ section’s “KS3 John presents seven statements that Jesus made, revealing snapshots of his nature and purpose. Read the seven ‘I am’ statements (see Resource Sheet 3). Discuss and list possible meanings. Students might be unsure at this point, but their understanding will grow as they learn more.”*  *This is only a part of the activity which goes onto* *‘ask; In what ways is Jesus like bread, a door, a vine, a light? Why*? ‘The material presupposes that Jesus did make these statements. And that there is a person, ‘John’, who wrote them. Yet there is no good evidence of a ‘John’ who wrote ‘John’ and most scholars see signs of a joint effort, written long after the ‘events’, and edited over time. Ok but the John being referred to here is the text of Johns Gospel. That exists even if you want to debate its authorship. As Brine observes of ‘resurrection’, what is the point in listing ‘possible meanings’? This activity is looking at metaphor used in the bible and doesn’t mention resurrection. The material presupposes that there are worthwhile meanings to be found. Real understanding cannot grow from such immersion.

*Again later in the same unit on incarnation in the section on ‘Making connections’. In full this reads ‘Ask students to Comment on how far (the underlying is Alex’s) the world today could benefit from a saviour, linking to the ideas explored above and offering their own reasons and justifying their responses.”* ‘How far?’ The very notion of a ‘saviour’ is that, by definition, they will save. They will provide salvation, and not just ‘a bit’ of salvation. You can’t be ‘a little bit’ saved. Even worse, the question steers pupils away from the, far more important, notion that there *is* no ‘salvation’ and that belief in ‘salvation’, from deities *or* human beings, is part of the *problem;* a timorous avoidance of the difficulties and responsibilities of being an adult. *This activity is asking pupils to critique the idea of the world needing a saviour.*

*To give a bit more context to this unit (which is up on the Understanding Christainity website) also explores a range of denominational approaches to worship from Quaker to Pentecostal and in the Digging Deeper section explores Jesus as represented in art, Body Theology including the views of the Lesbian and Gay Christian movement, and ‘They should explore non-religious views and weigh up how far they might also support the idea of human dignity and value’*

Alan Brine’s general concerns about the direction in which the Church is trying to take RE are well illustrated within these “Understanding Christianity” course materials:

*At the heart of this lies a hidden attempt to market a particular understanding of Christianity which undermines a core ideal of religious literacy i.e. the impartial study of religion and belief.*

<http://www.reonline.org.uk/news/alans-blog-thinking-theologically-in-re-part-2-alan-brine/>

*There are a number of different ways to deepen learning in RE. These need to kept in tension and no one discipline should dominate. A diversity of disciplines (history, philosophy, sociology, phenomenology etc.) can each bring a depth (the roots) to the study of religion and belief.*

*These are Alans’ views*

Alex Howard

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