

Primary Conversations

Penny Mawdsley talks about humanism with primary school children.

The extracts from Peter Stribblehill's dissertation in the Easter issue of *Sofia* examined what the non-realist approach has to offer inter-religious dialogue between adults. Can the non-realist also provide a positive influence on the inter-religious dialogue taking place in the regular primary school classroom – and playground? It is some time since there has been any discussion in the Network about how we might discuss with children the theological ideas and understandings that are familiar to us in SOF. Can it be done at all, let alone effectively, with those who haven't yet reached an abstract thinking stage in their intellectual development?

I would like to share my positive and rewarding experience of conveying to 9 and 10 year olds the notion of religion – and particularly a concept of God – understood as a wholly human creation. I have now introduced this approach to upper juniors in a variety of Cheshire primary schools (local authority and denominational), via 'the back door' in my capacity as Humanist representative on the Chester and West Cheshire Interfaith Forum. This body has produced an educational off-shoot – the Harmony Group – whose remit is to further community cohesion at schools level.

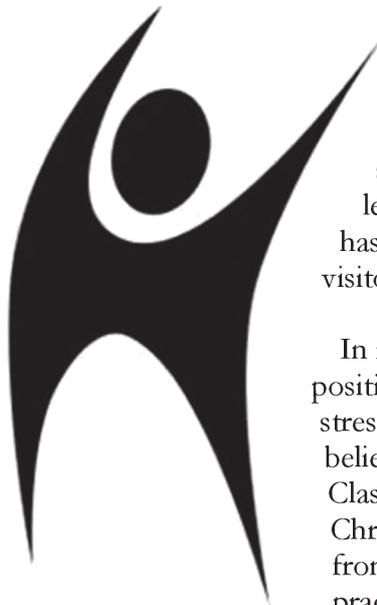
My colleagues and I, representing the practice of the various religious faiths and life-stances to be found in the wider locality, visit schools to demonstrate to the children our ability to work closely together and to emphasise what we have in common rather than our differences. We operate under the symbol of the EAR. This symbol for us not only represents the importance of listening – *really* listening – to one another in order better to understand where each of us is coming from, but also represents the qualities for which the letters of the acronym

stand: Equality of treatment for all under the law, Acceptance of differences in belief and lifestyle and Respect for each other as unique human beings.

Our visits are not an attempt to proselytise but rather to communicate the key features of the particular faith or life-stance that each of us represents. We finish the week with a joint assembly to demonstrate practically our working together 'in harmony'. The children join us in singing a catchy Baha'i song (with whose words we are all comfortable) and, dispensing with any sort of prayer or overt moral message, we invite a couple of volunteers from each class to come up to the front to 'show and tell' the rest of the school something of what they have learned and done with us (each class has usually had three different visitors).

In my sessions I aim to present a positive and upbeat view of Humanism, stressing, where possible, what I *do* believe rather than what I don't. Classes include those from practising Christian and Muslim homes as well as from those where no particular faith is practised. All the schools have had regular input from local clergy and are generally familiar with basic Christian teaching, Bible stories and an orthodox concept of God.

In contrast to my colleagues, I always ask for upper junior classes. I can't compete with the colourful and entertaining activities provided by the others, covering the full age-range viz. tasting exotic dishes with the Sikh, trying on a sari and dancing with the Hindu, watching a fascinating power-point presentation by the Jain, playing tug-o'-war wearing mule masks with the Quaker, singing along with a guitar-playing Anglican Franciscan priest in traditional habit, kneeling on prayer mats and learning to write their names in Arabic script with the imam or



making a tower of Babel out of desks and chairs with the Jewish visitor...but with me they have a different kind of experience.

This might be described as something of a concentrated philosophical workout (and boy, do they concentrate, bless them!). I've found that it is possible to engage everyone with the activities that I provide over the forty minutes or so that I have them – from an opening 'true or false' game to explore what it means to be human, to filling in a quiz-sheet-cum-word search designed to consolidate their learning about what it means to be a practising Humanist.

I expend considerable energy encouraging comments and questions from the children throughout the session, finding ways to spark off and stimulate yet further questions and comments. We find ourselves travelling down unplanned avenues into unexpected areas: Why does all our food depend on something being killed? How do we know that plants don't feel pain? Why don't Humanists feel uncomfortable celebrating Christmas, let alone Easter? Why do some people like Hitler do evil things? Why, if we humans know that life ends in death, don't old people like my Gran sit in a heap and cry? What exactly do Chester Humanists do apart from drink when they meet in the pub?

In the practical activity I have devised to illustrate the basic features of Humanism I avoid saying starkly and simplistically 'Humanists don't believe in God, gods or spirits of any kind' but rather I go for a softer approach – one that I like to feel is SOF-friendly: Humanists believe that the human imagination and our desire to find explanations for the complexity of the world in which we live has led to the creation of the idea of gods, God with a capital "G" and the notion of a supernatural world of spirits etc. and further, that these ancient ideas have been continually refined down the centuries, tweaked and adapted by different communities as people have become more knowledgeable and sophisticated scientifically.

At the end of most of my sessions, even in Church schools, there is at least one child who comes up to say a quiet 'thank you'. Then, having apparently recognised something of the subtle direction in which I have steered them, adds: 'I don't believe in God either'. The feedback that I have received from both teachers and children has been generally positive and interesting. Teachers have noted with some surprise that the children have coped well with 'conversation about serious issues and challenging topics'; several teachers commented that they hadn't previously known anything about Humanism.

Along with the growing number of teachers who are currently campaigning for P4C (the Philosophy for Children movement, exemplified by SAPERE) I am increasingly convinced that thinking and reflection should be an overt and core component of the National Curriculum at all levels.

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FROM The Flower

How fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean
Are thy returns! Even as the flowers in spring,
to which, besides their own demean,
The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring.
Grief melts away
Like snow in May,
As if there were no such cold thing.

Who would have thought my shrivelled heart
could have recovered greenness? It was gone
quite underground, as flowers depart
To see their mother-root, when they have blown;
Where they together
all the hard weather,
dead to the world, keep house unknown.

These are thy wonders, Lord of power,
Killing and quickening, bringing down to hell
and up to heaven in an hour;
Making a chiming of a passing-bell.
We say amiss
This or that is;
Thy word is all, if we could spell.

George Herbert