

Solarity: The Story So Far

Dave Francis and Denise Cush

The story of Solarity as an educational project of the SOF Network begins in 2006. The future of the Network itself was being questioned, perhaps as it still is by many today. Would anybody really miss the SOF Network if it disappeared? Perhaps the Network had already served its purpose when it had provided a late 1980s lifeline for radical 'non-realist' clergy who were taking their leave of the medieval realist God of traditional Anglican religion. Did the Network have a 'use-by' date that was fast expiring? Or was there something in the changing membership, inspired by a values-led vision of how future religion might look, that pointed to a broader and more positive future? Our own local (Wessex) group, began to think about whether we had anything to say to younger people. When I mentioned the idea of speaking to the next generation to the SOF Trustees, one of their number looked over his spectacles at me and enquired, 'When you say 'the next generation', do you mean the *recently* retired?'

But we felt that SOF was exploring something that would be of interest and value to all the succeeding generations as well as those already involved. The idea that since religion was a human creation and that it was not to be discounted as worthless on that account, and that the world's great religious and philosophical traditions were a treasury of resources to be mined for their wisdom, was one with which we could work. Not that those traditions were beyond criticism. SOF Network members who saw themselves as free from the shackles of their own traditional metaphysical beliefs could freely engage in a sifting of the soil to see what of real value remained.

This was a radical turn whose time had come. In educational terms, despite the reactionary retreat into 'schools with a religious character', it became obvious that, in order to prepare young people for life in a complex multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious Britain, they would need to be introduced to a variety of major (and some not so widely practised) faiths and beliefs. How else would they navigate a sea of faith whose tides were influenced not by one moon, but by several heavenly bodies?

Members of the SOF Wessex group wanted to know more about young people today. Where were they in relation to religion and belief? Was it true that they saw themselves not so much as 'religious' but as 'spiritual', and if they did, what did that mean? At this time, Denise was collecting research on the

'spirituality' of Generation Y, i.e., those born roughly between 1981 and 1996, including her own work on teenage witches and pagans. She found that these young people generally had a negative view of 'religion' and that regular church-going, for example, was rare. Nevertheless, though only a minority said they believed in God, even fewer said they were atheists. Rather, there was a popular belief that there had to be 'something more to life' and a view that religion was an individual choice or identity for other people, and so tolerated and respected. Their own worldview was well summed up by Savage, Collins-Mayo and Mayo, 2006, as a 'happy midi-narrative' (as opposed to a 'grand religious narrative' type of explanation of the purposes of existence), that set great store by the happiness of their friends and family in the here and now as well as their own. The main problem with this seemed to be a lack of accompanying resilience when things went badly, with many young people unfairly blaming themselves when happiness did not appear.

Of course, these were generalisations, but it was clear to us that the SOF Network had something of importance to say to such a generation. There was much to be gained from the world's rich resource of human experience at a time when this was more than any previous time in history readily available. Various means were suggested: perhaps we could start a SOF Sunday School, or produce a 'comic'-style children's insert for the regular *Sofia* magazine, or hold events for families in the style of the Jewish 'Limmud' conferences, or the Christian Greenbelt festivals?

In the end, the most practical way forward was to design a website of learning resources that could be accessed by young people themselves, or by leaders of clubs or groups interested in exploring some of the deeper questions of life. We didn't want to pretend to be 'doing RE' or competing with the regular curriculum, and it occurred to Dave that there was a gap in the out-of-school-hours provision for a school religion and philosophy club. As a teacher and adviser in RE he had seen some dreadful 'Bible clubs' taking place where very little of educational value, even to do with the Bible, was actually taking place. He also noticed that there was a big increase in the number of parents choosing to educate their children at home and that there was no provision for religious education in the online subscription packages being offered to such parents. Here, then was a gap in

educational provision that SOF could fill.

Dave put a proposal together to take to the Trustees for some financial support to enable him to pay a small group of teachers to help build a website of materials for out-of-school-hours Religion and Philosophy Clubs. He had flirted with the idea of calling it 'SOF Learning', but then, noticing Don Cupitt's 'Solar Ethics' on his shelf, hit upon the name 'Solarity'. In the 1995 book, Don describes 'solar living' as 'the art of living extrovertly', that is, 'giving it all you've got'; living out your life in an ethically defensible and justifiable way, with emphasis on concern for others and for the world rather than self-advantage. This includes support for such humanitarian movements that are opposed to slavery, racism and cruelty to living beings.

Not everyone liked the name 'Solarity' at first. David Paterson said 'Oh no!', but he did come round to liking it, along with other trustees as the project got support and developed. John Pearson was an early enthusiast, along with Penny Mawdsley, who made a good contribution to the actual learning materials, and Oliver Essame has been crucial in developing the website.

The first draft of what a Solarity website might look like was presented to the SOF conference in 2009 and members like John Edmondson and Katy Jennison were amongst those who fed in ideas to the project. John persuaded us that we should include provision for the youngest children in the project and that is why we have several sessions that have been written by an early years specialist aiming to enrich children's understanding of human values such as friendship, love, courage, fairness and so on.

Taking past SOF conference themes and interests as the basis for an investigative programme, a small team of primary and secondary school teachers set about creating the 82 'sessions' that comprise the current Solarity offer. It took around four years to write sufficient materials and try them out, before we were ready to launch the Solarity website.

In the last 18 months we have been promoting Solarity as a resource for teachers and parents as they



struggle with increased demands for home learning ideas. Religion and philosophy don't usually get much of a look in when it comes to government advice on what is essential, but we have been doing our best to remind everyone involved in education about the importance of investigating what really matters in life just as much as keeping up with literacy and numeracy.

Where could we go from here? The idea emerged that we could develop what we had into a coherent and comprehensive programme for a new religious education, under the increasingly popular title of 'Religion and Worldviews'. What we have currently in Solarity has no underpinning progression as you would expect in a formal education setting – the sessions are pretty randomly strung together and group leaders or students themselves can dip in and out wherever. This has some strengths of course, but does not represent a coherent curriculum. RE itself has been undergoing somewhat of a national crisis, in part because of government initiatives such as the EBacc, which omitted RE, and academisation, which permitted schools to skirt around the legal requirements.

There have been continuing shifts in public perceptions of religion. To more and more people religion was linked to illiberal social attitudes, oppressive and discredited institutions and unscientific/unbelievable metaphysical truth-claims and even violent extremism. Religion had become a 'toxic brand', especially to the 'nones', that is, the rapidly rising number of people who answer 'none' to the question about which religion they follow.

Against this background, a national Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) was set up aiming to make recommendations for a new RE that was fit for the world as it is now. This included the suggestion of changing the name from RE to Religion and Worldviews (R&W), and for all schools, including so-called 'faith schools', to provide a national entitlement for pupils to receive an education in R&W according to a set of principles based on what pupils need to grasp in order to understand what religions / worldviews are all about.

This is where Solarity can find some purchase for further development. Denise had been one of the CoRE commissioners and Dave was part of the team that set it up, and both were now working on a project aiming to provide a new 'RE' that would give today's students the knowledge, skills and understanding they would need to make the best of their lives in complex and uncertain multi-worldview times.

The 'Big Ideas for RE' project, led by former Ofsted HMI, Barbara Wintersgill, and involving RE specialists from across England as well as science education expert, Michael Reiss, made a good start on a small budget and produced two publications that have grabbed international attention and some acclaim (*Big Ideas for RE*: tinyurl.com/bigideasforre and *Putting Big Ideas for RE into Practice*: tinyurl.com/bipractice). The Big Ideas project may have stopped there but it occurred to us that if funds could be raised, there was an opportunity to link what we had so far done with Solarity with Big Ideas for RE to create a coherent and comprehensive programme of study for the RE/R&W curriculum. With Dr Wintersgill continuing at the helm, this could be the nationally recognised project with academic credibility that would take Solarity to another level. A proposal was drawn up and funding sought from several potential educational charities, including the SOF Network, so that we could pay busy teachers and advisers to contribute the planning. The Six Big Ideas are summed up as:

1. Continuity, Change and Diversity;
2. Words and Beyond;
3. A Good Life;
4. Making Sense of Life's Experiences;
5. Influence and Power;
6. The Big Picture. See 'Putting Big Ideas for RE into Practice' for full narratives.

These Big Ideas were a good fit for the Solarity themes, incorporating ideas of helping children and young people to mine the world's great religious and philosophical traditions for their wisdom, whilst developing critical abilities in investigating their claims, contextualising their stories and recognising their diversity.

Thanks to the generosity of SOF members, including the support of Don Cupitt, plus additional funding from another charity, the St Luke's Foundation in Exeter, we have recruited around 16 teachers and advisers from right across the country to put the plan into practice.

Several new units of work have been produced. Examples are being shared with SOF trustees and other members as we want to ensure that the material reflects SOF interests. The programme we are producing, however, will not be a form of SOF indoctrination. Rather, it will enable pupils to explore the major concerns of human existence and critically examine how the great religious and philosophical traditions respond to them.

The team has drafted a new website to hold the material – though it is very much in the early stages and will need development. It will carry the logos and links to the SOF Network as the major partner in funding this phase of the project, and St Luke's College Foundation. The units of learning on the site will treat both traditional worldviews and children's own developing worldviews as a treasury for engagement and understanding. It will present a non-binary approach to R&W, exploring the fuzziness of the very concepts of 'religion' and 'worldviews' and aim to help children and young people to live positively in an uncertain world. Religious and other worldviews provide a resource that extends beyond a person's individual family culture and background. Children should have access to this whole treasury in order to 'understand humanity'. And this includes the idea of 'religion' as a human creation with its complex impact on human history.

In a further exciting development, Dave has now joined an advisory panel to develop national models of the curriculum for R&W under the directorship of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC). We are very much hoping that ideas from the Solarity and Big Ideas project will prove useful here too!

Further funding is still required to complete the project. You can donate here: solarity.org.uk/support_us/

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