



# Religious education and social justice: reflections on an approach to teaching religious education

Patricia Hannam<sup>1</sup> · Christopher May<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper examines the possible relationship between religious education and social justice. A consideration of what it is that education in the public sphere should seek to achieve, in a normative sense, is followed by an explanation of how we conceptualise social justice in this paper. This leads us to be able to explain why the relationship between teacher and child or young person is significant and why it is insufficient to conceptualise religious education only in terms of knowledge. Instead, we propose that the teacher's first responsibility when beginning any course of study is to bring the child to attend to their experience and that of their wider community. We argue that curriculum cannot be made in isolation of the context of the child and that education is not something that takes place in abstraction. Rather, it requires the teacher to be attentive to this *particular* child, the one who is here now, and in this *particular* place. Having begun to set out the educational position of our argument, we show how this is working practically guided by a Locally Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education: Living Difference IV, in religious education taught in a school in an area of high deprivation in the southeast of Hampshire. UK.

**Keywords** Education · Social justice · Teaching · Religious education

## 1 Introduction

In this paper we open a discussion into the relationship between religious education and social justice. We proceed to develop an argument that shows why it might matter that a religious education which has an interest in all children and young people and their present and

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✉ Patricia Hannam  
thinkingworlds@gmail.com

Christopher May  
C.May@pcs.hants.sch.uk

<sup>1</sup> County Inspector/Adviser RE, History & Philosophy, Hampshire, UK

<sup>2</sup> Park Community School, Hampshire, UK

future lives, should first attend to what it is teachers should seek to do in their teaching. We argue that such a focus on teachers and their teaching is vital before the curriculum is made.

We proceed to develop our argument in several steps. Beginning with a consideration of what it is that education in the public sphere should seek to achieve, in a normative sense, we move on to outline our position on social justice. This leads us to be able to explain why the relationship between teacher and child or young person is significant and why it is insufficient to conceptualise religious education only in terms of matters to be encountered and studied through a pre-planned curriculum alone. Instead, we propose that the experience of each child and young person in their wider community, must form the starting point of any course of study, and that the teacher should begin by bringing the child to attend to this experience. In simple terms this is because curriculum cannot be made in isolation of the context of the child. However, in addition we want to emphasise that since education is not something that takes place in abstraction, it requires the teacher to be attentive to this particular child, the one who is here now and in this particular place. Having begun to set out the educational position of our argument, we show how this can work practically, as modelled in a *Locally Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education: Living Difference IV* (2021), and then in the context of religious education taught in a school in an area of high deprivation in the southeast of Hampshire, UK.

Finally, a key point we want to emphasise and bring into the discussion section of this paper is that religious education which professes an interest in social justice, cannot be only concerned with the acquisition of knowledge (however knowledge is construed). Rather, it will be interested in what children and young people can actually do with what they have encountered and studied, and that what matters is the difference this makes to the way they think and speak and act in the world.

## 2 Education and the public sphere

This paper is particularly concerned with education taking place in the ‘public sphere’, as discussed elsewhere (see for example Hannam, 2021, 2020, 2019). We are therefore not only referring to the physical location of the school, or the curriculum being taught in the school, but also and importantly we are exploring here the ‘quality of social action and interaction’ (Hannam, 2020. p. 129) occurring in the school between the people who are there (children, young people and adults). Furthermore, we are also interested in the quality of action and interaction between those people in the school and the local community. For this and other reasons, what education is understood to be seeking to achieve must at least in part be understood in relational terms. That is to say in terms of what a child or young person can actually do in their wider life, with others, as a consequence of the interaction in the classroom.

We look to Arendt (see for example 1958) to explain this further, and to bring into the light reasons as to why this might matter. Her point, in the briefest terms, is that the public sphere is characterised by action in plurality (with others). Action, it is important to note, Arendt distinguishes clearly from other kinds of human activity such as work, and labor. Whilst work and labor are both essential for human well-being, neither are in themselves the things that distinguish us as being human, as being unique, irreplaceable beings. Action is the phenomena that must be undertaken with others – in plurality – and is where our unique-

ness is revealed. Indeed, it is through this action in plurality, that is to say through speech for example with others, that the public sphere appears, and is in contrast to work and labor. Work and labor can both be dehumanising; an example of this being mindless work undertaken on factory production lines. Indeed, Arendt would say that where ever people are not able to speak and think for themselves, the public sphere is itself diminished. The ultimate consequences of such diminishment being, according to Arendt, to enable first the possibility of authoritarianism and even later the emergence of totalitarianism. It is speech and thought with others therefore than can be understood as action.

An assertion made here is that advancing action, understood in terms of thought and speech, must be central to what education should seek to achieve, and as argued elsewhere (See Hannam, 2019, p.130). We are not wanting to say that totalitarianism is the inevitable outcome of an education system understood in relation mainly to knowledge, however we are wanting to argue that there are undesirable risks consequent from an education system that takes no or little regard to the relationships in the classroom, or to the way teaching takes place.

### 3 A word about social justice

Whilst education cannot resolve all the world's injustices, as teachers we notice acutely the impact of unequal distribution of social 'goods' in material terms in the lives of the children and young people we teach. Basics such as wealth, health and life expectancy itself are increasingly unequally distributed in England as elsewhere, and easily observable in many school communities (See for example Gov.UK, 2021, Rea & Tabor, 2022, Office for National Caul, 2020).

In simple terms, bringing about social justice can be understood as rectifying this imbalance. However, there are questions around the part education should or is able to play in this. Within the school setting this may be understood as involving the drive for inclusion and participation across the broad scope of the school, frequently measured by achievements in public examination as well as ensuring equal access to the opportunities provided within and beyond the school context. Ofsted's inspection framework identifies this as a priority. It states that curriculum should be planned in such a way as to provide the knowledge and skills required to support future learning and employment, including ensuring groups such as those disadvantaged or with special educational needs or disabilities receive the knowledge and 'cultural capital' they need to be successful in life. This includes both next steps educationally, and preparation for life in modern Britain (Gov.UK, Education Inspection Framework, 2021). For others, for example the social mobility commission (Gov.uk, State of the Nation: Social mobility and the pandemic, 2021), it could be identified in relation also to young people receiving an equitable share in the personal, social, and economic 'goods' intended as the output of this system (see for example OECD, 2012 and Cassen & Kingdon, 2007).

However, social justice is not only a matter of redistribution in material terms – this could risk a kind of cultural imperialism – where 'success' is judged effectively on the replacement of working-class or other values and ways of life of the children and families in a community, with more middle-class values and aspirations. For this reason and working also with Illich (see for example 1971), we suggest that schools in areas of greater depriva-

tion may be even further disadvantaged by a purely distributive model of social justice. The education system as an institution relies on a set of values which posit one form of cultural and social capital as neutral and uncontested. This disadvantages many working-class children for example as it presupposes a certain level and type of social and cultural knowledge which many have not had access to. Where this is combined with the education system monopolising the value and distribution of social goods in terms of qualifications, it leaves those with less access to these cultural norms in a weakened position. Viewing justice in terms of the distribution of commodities, ignores questions of value, meaning and power relations within the existing school and wider society (see Young, 1990 for example).

If the solution is only framed in relation to seeking an increase in the opportunities for the development of such socially valued cultural capital, the curriculum is defined in terms of providing additional experiences for those identified as disadvantaged. This deficit model will at best lead to ignoring the pre-existing cultural knowledge and sense of meaning and value which young people from such backgrounds bring into the classroom, or at worst devaluing and in other ways disregarding it altogether. The question for education raised by this is around whose ‘culture’ is being inculcated, whose culture has the greater cultural worth? Without teachers ensuring participation in the decision-making process or where there is no opportunity for opening up space for young people to exist in the world as situated speaking and thinking individuals, we run the risk of a form of repeating (albeit in well-meaning terms) pre-existent social domination. Or indeed of falling back into what Freire (Freire, 2017, p. 45) terms as a ‘banking’ model of educational transmission.

Clearly this is complex. Nevertheless, for this and other reasons, where social justice is in some way actively sought to be brought about through an educational proposal that itself professes an interest in social justice, the reality and experience of oppression and domination must also be addressed. Social justice therefore must be considered far more broadly as something that is perhaps a process or lived practice, rather than an end goal. That is to say, it cannot only be understood in terms of redressing or reorganising things in some kind of a way in order to achieve a particular level or balance of social or indeed academic ‘goods’ in material terms.

#### 4 Social justice and education

Freire argued that, “one cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion. Good intentions notwithstanding” (Freire, 2017, p. 68). Equally one cannot expect positive results in relation to social justice which, while considering the distribution of social and material goods, fails to account for the humanity of those in receipt of such goods. Therefore, the position we continue to develop in this paper is that a critical element here will lay in ensuring each child and young person is able to grow in their capacity for discernment. This is a discernment regarding their situation and that of those around them. Our view is that this is likely to come about at least in part through a growing capacity to attend to and discern about one’s own situation and the situation of those around you, and that *this* will be intimately linked with the possibility of social justice. In this paper therefore, we are not only interested in how young people might be better prepared to secure a fairer share of material goods (by achieving better General

Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) results for example). We are also interested in how young people are able to reflect and focus on their own and other's humanity. That is how they become better able to discern value in and of their own place in the world, as socially situated beings, living in the plurality of the world with others in the local and wider community. This is important if education is not only to take an interested position on social justice, but also interested in bringing about the changes likely to make it possible.

## 5 Religious education teaching and the possibility of social justice

In this section, we discuss a proposal for religious education that understands the purpose of religious education to ... 'play an educational part in the lives of children and young people as they come to speak, think and act in the world' (see Living Difference IV, 2021, purpose statement: p. 2). This is distinctive from some other voices in the religious education world currently which are often seen to be referring to knowledge of various forms, or literacy of religion and worldviews. Such foci lead us to raise questions regarding what it is that the acquisition of knowledge or becoming literate or studying worldviews would actually achieve in the lives of young people who encounter it. This proposal for religious education advanced here is one that begins with an interest in children and young people's experience. A sequence of lessons will always begin with the child or young person's attention being brought to focus on real lived experience; first of all, their own. This is important since religious education cannot only be an encounter with and study of abstract ideas, but an encounter with and study of lived life.

However, of course, a focus on experience is not enough. There is also a time in a sequence of lessons where there will be serious study and engagement with knowledge of other's ways of life and existing in the world. This may indeed be material that has emerged from sociological research, or anthropological ethnographies for example. This could also be the time for hermeneutical engagement with religious texts or theological study and critique. However, without preceding this with an invitation for the child to give attention to their experience it is unlikely they will consider the new material with the open-mindedness that will be needed to ensure serious study. This is precisely the quality of 'intellectual humility' Simone Weil speaks of (Weil, 1965, p.72). Locating the beginning of a sequence of lessons directly in the experience of the child or young person, will be an important first step in ensuring that the educational process is capable of resisting the banking model of education focused only on knowledge acquisition (see Freire 2017).

However, although beginning with the experience of the child or young person will ensure that they are more receptive to the knowledge the teacher brings to the classroom, these two experiential and intellectual moves are not going to be sufficient to really influence the way a child speaks and acts. In Living Difference IV, (2021), a third key move in the approach to teaching is clearly explained. Here the teacher's responsibility is to bring the children and young people to engage with questions of value. This will first be to ask why what has been studied might matter in the lives of those encountered in this sequence of lessons. The second but perhaps more important responsibility here is then to invite the children and young people to respond to the questions themselves as to "How might this matter to me?" This turn to value brings in the matter or question of discernment.

The cultivation of discernment is not the same as ‘developing’ a worldview, and the reason as to why we remain interested in ways of existing religiously in the world (rather than only in having a ‘view’ on the world). This matters a great deal because religion itself can be transformatory – and there is something to explore here with young people in search of social justice.

Of course, it must be remembered that this is where social justice is understood in terms of personal and community liberation and emancipation, and not only in terms of reorganising the structures of the world. Through conceptualising social justice in this way and by acknowledging the young person’s experience we avoid questions of confessionalism or indoctrination. Through coming to discernment, the young person, not the teacher, has freedom (in the relational sense meant by Arendt, 1958) in their response to the encounters with the material presented (see for example Strhan, 2012, p. 162). It could be the case that without this possibility of encounter we may be open to concerns around confessionalism (Hannam, 2019, p. 46), or a situation where we teach by imparting knowledge without ever allowing the young person the risk of agency (Biesta, 2013, pp. 139–140). Religious education interested in social justice therefore has the potential to be transformatory in how the young person comes to speak and act in the world but this can only be the case if challenges regarding confessionalism are avoided.

Living Difference IV (2021) has in its purpose statement for religious education the intention ‘... to introduce children and young people to what a religious way of looking at, and existing in, the world may offer in leading one’s life, individually and collectively’ and further that it ‘...intends to play an educational part in the lives of children and young people as they come to speak, think and act in the world’ (Living Difference IV, 2021, purpose statement: p. 2). This identifies an approach to the teaching of religious education that is about opening doors through introducing children to new experiences, information and ways of experiencing the world. It is focused on the existential question of actually leading one’s life and how education, and religious education in particular, might make space for this. Importantly it leaves such questions firmly in the hands of the young person themselves; judgment, in terms of discernment is with the young person. For these reasons, Living Difference offers a distinct approach to education and religious education specifically.

## 6 Why teachers and their teaching matter

We recognise that at this time there are a number of strong voices in the religious education world, promoting a range of focus for the subject. For example, on knowledge; substantive, disciplinary and personal (Ofsted Research Review 2021); a focus on literacy (Wright, 2015 & Dinham & Shaw 2015) and especially since the publishing of the Commission on Religious Education final report (2018) a focus on worldviews (see for example Tharani 2018).

Our view is that whilst it is likely to be useful in life to have knowledge about religions, we still need to ask explicitly as to what end – what purpose - is this knowledge being acquired? Whilst it may be useful in life to be literate about religions, we want to ask to what end religious literacy? Whilst it may be useful to study other people’s religion or other worldviews in some kind of abstraction – be it personal or organizational we, with others still want to ask to what end? (For a longer discussion of this point see Biesta & Hannam 2022). By contrast, if discernment and action are understood to be a key focus of what it is

education should achieve for children and young people, the role of the teacher in the classroom is required to be oriented in a very particular kind of way. In particular this ensures that the teacher is first concerned with how children and young people exist in the world and secures the child as being central to the educational concern. This is different from other contemporary conceptualisations of religious education where at times the teacher seems to go missing altogether under the weight of curriculum frameworks (see for example the Religious Education Council's Draft Handbook for Religion and Worldviews Education, 2022) or at best where teachers are understood as technicians who are to be effective 'deliverers' of parcels of knowledge to be remembered, or as being responsible for securing religious literacy. All this so far leads us to be able to clarify why it is that teachers, and their teaching, is so important for education concerned with social justice; that is to say what might be the *necessary* elements of teaching seeking to make a difference to the way children and young people 'think, speak and act in the world' (Living Difference IV, 2021, p.2).

In a democracy it is assumed, in a common-sense kind of way, that freedom is important. However, what this means precisely does need spelling out. In order to do this, we go to both Simone Weil (1965) and Hannah Arendt (1958), and outline here a position on freedom for which a longer discussion can be found elsewhere (see for example Hannam, 2019). Suffice here to note that we understand freedom to be the kind of thing that exists under particular conditions; this is one only in relation to others; this is different from common assumptions where freedom may be conceptualised in relation to individual free-will or personal freedom. Indeed, from Arendt, we would say that such an individualised notion of freedom is more likely to contribute to authoritarianism or worse and may add further to social injustice. Our proposal is that it will be the cultivation of discernment, understood as a capacity to identify value (see Fromm 1957 & Weil 1965) and regarded as being essential to making a judgement about how to act in one's own life (Freire, 2000), that is also required.

In summary, of this section and this paper thus far, our view is that whilst knowing things or being literate or knowledgeable about many things including worldviews may be useful, these things are not in themselves sufficient explanation of what religious education should seek to achieve. None of them on their own will be what makes the difference in terms of social justice or likely to be sufficient to make a difference to the way someone lives their life. What is absolutely necessary to bring about the social justice as outlined here, will involve taking a particular position on education. Further and in relation to this what will be absolutely necessary will involve taking a particular position on the professional role and responsibilities of religious education teachers, prior to their making of curriculum.

## **7 Case study showing what this means in the context of Park Community School (PCS)**

We now move to offer an example of what this might look like in the context of a particular school, as the Locally Agreed Syllabus Living Difference IV (2021) is embedded into teaching and curriculum making. Park Community School is situated in the southeast of Hampshire in Havant. At the time of writing, 58% of the student intake is classed as disadvantaged with 49% in receipt of Free School Meals. For this reason, we are very aware of the challenges facing young people and the community relating to both the unequal distribution of material and social goods, and the competing value systems at work within education

and the community. The effect of such competing value systems on disadvantaged groups is highlighted in research by Garth Stahl who writes “For a substantial number of white working-class boys, attending school is entering an entirely different ‘social space’ dominated by middle-class values. Therefore, the rejection of schooling for many working-class boys is a (gendered and classed) performance; for the most part their ‘resistance’ and ‘disaffection’ is a process of excluding themselves from what they are already excluded from (see also Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990)” Stahl (2015). Similarly with Freire, Stahl’s research highlights the need to address this experience of exclusion if we are to take social justice seriously.

Park Community School views itself as in year twenty of a sixty-year journey to move from a representative of a given normative value system imposed on the community, to an active partner as part of a community. A participant, not an agent of social reproduction, and a partner who will collaboratively support real change within the local community. The aim of this journey is to build social justice in both senses we have discussed. Challenging social injustice in terms of social goods is an important element, but so is the discernment of value in young people’s lives. Education is far broader than ‘knowing more and recalling more’.

We here want to identify a few examples of what this might look like in practice. This is not to suggest a model or exemplar for this process, but rather to identify that the argument we make can be given practical application and open discussion about how this might be achieved.

In 2017 the school set up a community group to tackle food poverty in the area as a result of concerns of children going hungry and the local foodbank frequently running out of food. The resulting initiative was ‘MUNCH’. This initially acted to offer a free hot meal every day during the school holidays, open to students and their families. The school nurse was also available on a drop-in basis as a community identified additional need. This aimed to be a sustainable local enterprise through working in partnership with local businesses to procure excess food which would otherwise end up in landfill, and through establishing a local food shop and café. The project has continued to grow and is now able to provide a meal every Thursday evening and monthly Sunday lunches during term time to the community. It allows volunteering and employment opportunities for young people in the community as well as tackling social isolation.

Such initiatives aim to identify community concerns and then work with the local community to reduce the impact of the unequal distribution of social and economic goods. They also aim to avoid the risk of simply seeing social justice in terms of distribution, leading, as Freire points out, to treating those targeted for support as objects by instead working for ‘reflective participation’ (Freire, 2000). The impact of MUNCH and other community-based activities such as ‘Connect4Summer’, a program of holiday activities, childcare and meals run in conjunction with other Hampshire schools, was nationally recognised with Susan Parish, the Business and Communities Manager at Park Community School, receiving an MBE in the 2022 New Year’s Honours for her work in developing these projects.

Park Community School has developed a range of further opportunities for students. These include offering training in construction and horticulture, work experience in ‘Park Design and Print Services’, the school’s small holding and off-site tea rooms. These do not count in school progress measures, but they are a part of the school taking an interested position on social justice.

Religious education is an integral part of this journey. The school has moved from limited Key Stage Four provision (no religious education lessons in year 10 and one lesson a



fortnight in year 11) with a number of applications for students to be withdrawn from religious education lessons each year, to all students being entered for full course GCSE and no withdrawals from all or part of the subject since 2018.

This is not to say that this outcome was the end goal, but rather this is the consequence of a belief that religious education can and should be transformatory and play an educative part in the lives of young people in the sense we have already outlined. This was achieved over a number of years through training in, and the embedding of, the pedagogical approach of Living Difference.

Religious education teachers are working with young people in a given context and this must be acknowledged. Imparting pre-determined knowledge alone is not enough and is a disservice to those we teach. Knowledge is important, we want young people leaving school religiously literate, with qualifications, but an interested position on social justice requires us to move further than this.

Through opening up space for the young person to experience themselves as a speaking, thinking and acting agent of their own lives within the plurality of the class, school and wider community we take the risk of, as Biesta puts it, seeing students not as “objects to be moulded and disciplined, but as subjects of action and responsibility” (Biesta, G., 2013).

In practice this means an approach to teaching that starts and ends with the young person. It means taking their concrete situation and bringing them to attend to important aspects of this, it means pushing for discernment with intellectual humility, not least from the teacher. It means opening up space for young people to explore what is of importance to them. And, as the school moves forward on its journey, it means expanding education into the community through social action. In short it means investing in students as unique young people and is much more than just depositing knowledge. Rather it is for teachers to take time with each of them as they come to discern what is valuable in their lives and for the future they will go on to create.

In addition to the core pedagogical approach, Living Difference IV (2021) offers further possibilities such as ‘Pondering Time’. This is the suggestion that up to 20% of learning time should take a more self-directed approach. This recognises the significance of attentiveness, curiosity, and the agency of the young person in co-constructing their learning. If religious education is to be transformatory, this is not something that can be imposed on a young person, it must seek to take the young person themselves seriously. Similarly, the use of P4C (Philosophy for Children) as a classroom pedagogy which is understood to secure critical, creative, collaborative and caring thinking to be developed again takes young people and what they have to say seriously (see for example, [www.sapere.org/why-sapere-p4c](http://www.sapere.org/why-sapere-p4c); Siddiqui & Gorard, 2017 and Hall & Liptai, 2005).

We accept that these examples do not provide a guaranteed pathway to securing a more socially just school and future for the young people we work with, but we suggest that religious education that does not take the experiences and reality of the young people in front of us seriously, will begin to close off this possibility. Religious education that does not seek to open space for young people to speak, think and act in the world will take less of a risk, but misses something essential if education is also to be seen as emancipatory.

## 8 Discussion and concluding comments

We are mindful that in many parts of the world, religious education is operating educational contexts where considerable focus is being placed upon notion of creating ‘knowledge-rich’ curricula (see for example the Ofsted Research Review 2021; Deng, 2022 and Nick Gibb’s speech as Minister of State for Schools, Department for Education, 2022). Further, that educational ‘success’ in this case is to be marked by what children and young people are able to ‘know and remember’ and teaching therefore comes to be conceptualised (see recent Initial Teacher Education (Gov.UK, 2022) and Early Career Teacher training (Gov.UK, 2019) frameworks) in terms of ‘instruction’ techniques that enhance particular ‘behaviours’ and of means to ‘deliver’ material developed somewhere else – perhaps commercially. See for example the case of a recent press release from the Department for Education stating the intention to transform the Oak National Academy into an ‘arms-length’ government body so that teachers, instead of ‘reinventing the wheel’ can utilize and deliver content provided by this body (Department for Education, 2022). However, this is all taking place in social contexts where, augmented by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is widening polarisation and political alienation exasperated by the role of social media (Duffy, Hewlett, McCrae & Hall, 2019; Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Levy & Razin, 2020). There is documented widening of the gap between rich and poor (Rea & Tabor, 2022; Caul, 2020) and in addition, the means people have to transform their lives are being restricted not expanded.

Religious education that seeks to be socially just and even transformatory cannot then do so without opening up the possibility for both an experiential and existential moment. Knowledge and religious literacy matter, but there must also be clarity about what this seeks to achieve. If this is to relate to social justice then we suggest, developing the capacity for discernment in relation to this knowledge, literacy or worldview is an essential feature. (For a fuller discussion of religious literacy see Biesta, G; Aldridge, D; Hannam, P and Whittle, S. 2019). Education in the public sphere, and in the context of this paper specifically religious education, that professes to have an interested position in social justice cannot be limited to knowledge transmission and teaching cannot be limited to a delivery model. Rather, such an education must also be interested in teachers and their teaching emphasising the uniqueness of each child. It will emphasise the significance of teachers bringing children to attend to what is of value in their lives (see for example Living Difference IV, 2021). It must also mean therefore growing the capacity of each teacher to think and speak about what we are doing as teachers educationally. This will be vital in order to grow in the sense of what teachers themselves understand they are seeking to achieve in the classroom, and the best ways to go about that.

There is clearly space for further quantitative and theoretical research in this area to test out our hypothesis. However, some questions we would identify at this stage meriting further investigation in relation to religious education and social justice could include: should religious education be seen as an emancipatory project and if so, what are teacher’s responsibilities? Does it matter how freedom is conceptualised in religious education and perhaps what scope is there for religious education teachers to create the classroom conditions in which social justice can become a reality?

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