

Albert Schweitzer and Reverence for Life

'The Rana Plaza Disaster – A Price Worth Paying?'

A Teaching and Learning Resource for Secondary Schools

Supporting Notes for Teachers

Background

Albert Schweitzer (1875 – 1965), theologian, philosopher, organist & medical doctor, built his world-view on the ethic of Reverence for Life - a philosophy that he developed over the course of his lifetime.

Reverence for Life is based around this premise:

***We should stand in awe of nature and treat all that lives,
including ourselves, with compassionate respect***

This teaching and learning resource has been designed in partnership with Reverence for Life UK and with secondary school teachers within Norfolk. It supports the Norfolk Agreed Syllabus for RE in particular through Key Stage 3 (11 to 16 years).

The resource comes in three parts:

1. These supporting notes designed to provide background, context and links for teachers
2. A PowerPoint biography illustrating the life of Albert Schweitzer
3. The main **Lesson Resource** focussing on Reverence for Life and the Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh. This PowerPoint includes ideas for individual, group and whole class activity

The whole resource is designed to be a practical introduction to the life and work of Albert Schweitzer and in particular his philosophy of Reverence for Life. It will enable pupils to understand and apply this philosophy to the fast changing world of the early twenty first century and in particular to one challenging example – the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Dhaka, Bangladesh and the subsequent loss of life and questions this raises.

Reverence for Life can become the 'lens' through which pupils can make decisions on moral and ethical issues that face them and our wider society today. The lesson resource that accompanies these notes therefore looks at the Rana Plaza building collapse in Greater Dhaka, Bangladesh on 24th April 2013. This building, part of which contained a garment factory that amongst others produced clothing for Primark and Matalan in the UK, collapsed killing 1,129 mostly female garment workers and injuring approximately 2,515 who were rescued.

It is considered to be the deadliest garment-factory accident in history, as well as the deadliest accidental structural failure in modern human history. Warnings to avoid using the building after cracks appeared the day before had been ignored. Garment workers were ordered to return the following day and the building collapsed during the morning rush-hour.

The resource will look at the story of one Bangladeshi seamstress - Reshma Begum – who was trapped in the rubble of a collapsed garment factory for 17 days and then rescued.

At 19, Reshma became a national heroine after the tragedy and is campaigning now for compensation for the families of the many victims.

The resource will asks pupils to consider the choices we make individually and collectively, their consequences and impact in the short and long term and whether 'reverence for life' should play a part in this debate. It will ask them to consider what Albert Schweitzer's response to the tragedy might have been and what he might have said.

Underlying the resource is the consideration of whether it is right that we enjoy the benefits of such labour in order to keep the costs of our clothing low and the profits of western companies high, when conditions for garment workers can be so appalling. **This is implied rather than stated overtly and is therefore left to teachers to explore at a sensitive and appropriate level with their pupils.** Following slide 22 of the **Lesson Resource**, areas for discussion and extended work could include:

- The fashion industry pushes us into ever greater consumption, but this is often a consumption of cheap clothing which itself creates a throwaway mentality, huge problems of waste disposal and an ever bigger drain on the earth's resources
- Working conditions for people in poorer countries, the insecurities of the labour market and the idea of 'throwaway' people
- Compensation made by the clothing companies, the problems of fair distribution, corrupt management and the value of honesty – for example families who had received the \$200 compensation from Primark were only those who were able to provide DNA evidence of their relative's death in the collapse
- The story of Reshma herself and the trauma she went through, her 'will to live' and what this says about inner strength through hardship and human courage

The resource therefore revolves around these questions and sees them through the lens of Reverence for Life:

'Was our desire for ever cheaper clothing worth such a high death toll?'

'Was the Rana Plaza Disaster a price worth paying?'

Where the Resource Fits In

This resource has been created in partnership with the charity Reverence for Life UK (see www.reverenceforlife.org.uk) and with secondary school teachers in Norfolk. It supports the Norfolk Agreed Syllabus for RE, published in 2012. Throughout the Agreed Syllabus, all areas of study should promote pupils' **spiritual, moral, social and cultural development** and this resource supports such an approach.

The resource has been written to support pupils in Key Stage 3 and in particular in the following areas:

- **Belonging: family, community and the world:** What religions and worldviews say about human rights and responsibilities, social justice and citizenship
- **Inspiration, influence and the impact of belief:** What religions and worldviews say about health, wealth, wars, animal rights and the environment
- **Ethics and Relationships:** Questions and influences that inform people's ethical and moral choices, including forgiveness, justice and the issues of good and evil

What is Reverence for Life?

Albert Schweitzer described how the significance of the idea of 'Reverence for Life' for the future of humanity dawned on him on the Ogowe River as an *"unexpected discovery, like a revelation in the midst of intense thought."*

While Schweitzer made numerous significant contributions to an incredible diversity of fields - medicine, music, biblical studies, philosophy and theology - he regarded Reverence for Life as his greatest contribution and the one by which he most wanted to be remembered.

Reverence for Life is a philosophy that says that the only thing we're really sure of is that we live, and want to go on living. And this is something that we share with everything else that lives – from elephants to blades of grass. So we are brothers and sisters to all living things, and nothing else, neither species nor race nor colour nor religion nor sex, should be more important than this one deepest, most extraordinary thing connecting us all - life.

The Principles

Reverence for Life is therefore based upon valuing life in all its varied forms including the environment which supports it – its principle can be stated as an aim to:

Never destroy any form of life, unless it is unavoidable; always try to enhance and support life wherever possible

In other words:

Regard your own life and all life with awe and respect and work to maximise life's full potential

This was Albert Schweitzer's big idea that he shared with the world in his writing and, more importantly, in his actions.

He once said:

“Example is not the main way to influence others. It is the only way”

The idea of Reverence for Life is now central to peace and environmental movements around the world. The [Earth Charter](#) is a great example, which is now endorsed by thousands of organisations and individuals, including all of us at Reverence for Life UK (RfLUK). The Earth Charter concludes with:

*“Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new **reverence for life**, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life”*

A Brief Biography for Albert Schweitzer

Albert Schweitzer was born in **1875**, the son of a Lutheran pastor, and brought up in the quiet valley villages of the Vosges Mountains, Alsace, then part of Germany and later part of France. In his twenties he wrote seminal works on Bach, on the Historical Jesus and on organ building.

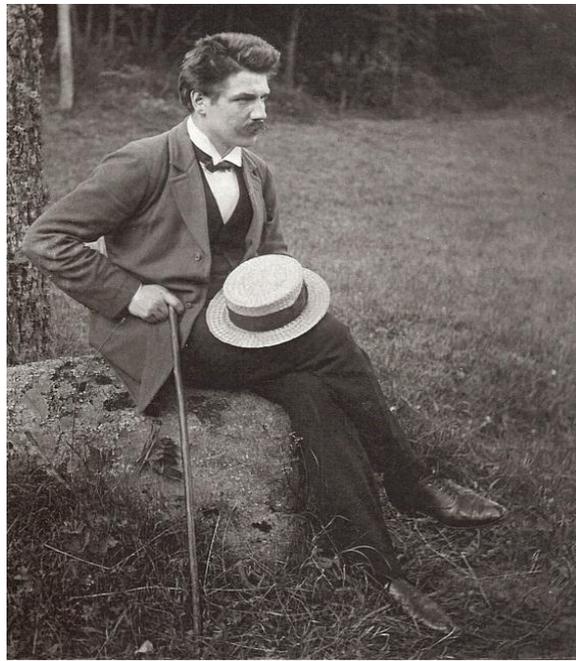
A committed Christian throughout his life, Schweitzer published two hugely important and controversial theological books, *“The Mystery of the Kingdom of God”* and *“The Quest of the Historical Jesus”*. The more Schweitzer studied Jesus, the more he felt that this was a man of such supreme spiritual and ethical perfection that for Schweitzer he was forever *“my Master.”*

Schweitzer also became an acclaimed organist, a church pastor, principal of a theological seminary and a university professor with doctorates in theology and philosophy. And yet none of this satisfied him.

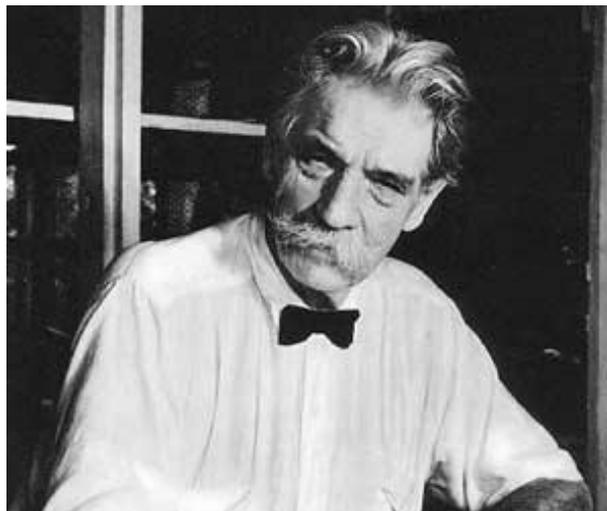
When Schweitzer was 21, he made a decision which shaped the rest of his life. One fine spring morning, looking out across the beautiful green valley, he thought that he was a very lucky man, and he made a promise to himself: He would continue his academic career until he was 30 and then find some way of serving humanity without having to use words.

Here are his own words: *“Calmly thinking the matter over before I got up, while the birds were singing outside, I decided that I would consider myself justified in living till I was thirty for science and art, and from that time on would devote myself to the direct service of humanity. I had often tried to settle what meaning lay hidden for me in the saying of Jesus 'Whosoever would save his life shall lose it, and whosoever shall lose his life for My sake and the Gospel's shall save it!' Now the answer was found. In addition to the outward, I now had inward happiness.”*

And from that decision he never swerved.

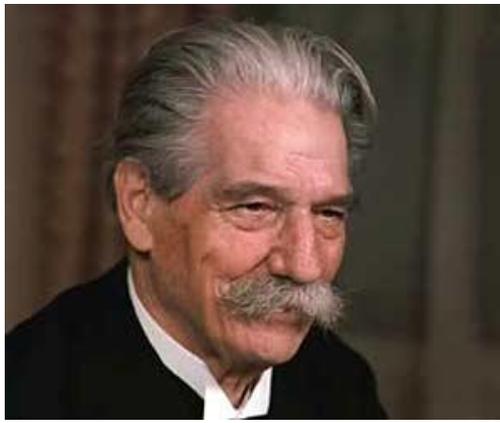


Therefore, in **1905** at the age of 30, aware of the desperate need of Africans for medical care, he decided to become a medical doctor and devote the rest of his life to serving the people of Africa. In **1913**, at the age of 37, Dr. Schweitzer and his wife, Hélène, opened a hospital in Lambarene, Gabon – then a province of French Equatorial Africa. Here, 150 miles into the interior, with one of the worst climates in the world, he devoted his life to providing health care for the indigenous population of the area.



In **1915**, Schweitzer began to form the phrase '*Ehrfurcht von dem Leben*', translated from the German as **Reverence for Life**, into an elementary and universal principle of ethics. From the "will to live" evidenced in all living beings, Schweitzer deduced and demonstrated the fundamental ethical response for humans – Reverence for Life. By stressing the interdependence and unity of all life, he was a forerunner of the environmental and animal welfare movements of to-day and gave voice to an ethic inherent and acceptable to all religious persuasions.

The hospital never stopped growing. Schweitzer survived both World Wars, and in 1953, at the age of 78, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for the year **1952** for his contribution in the field of philosophy, "Reverence for Life" and for his hospital.



In speeches and writings from 1952 onwards, he emphasized the dangers of nuclear weapons and the nuclear arms race between the superpowers, working along with Albert Einstein, Linus Pauling, Otto Hahn and Bertrand Russell.

He co-founded The Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy in **1957** and on 23rd April he made his "Declaration of Conscience" speech which was broadcast to the world over Radio Oslo, pleading for the abolition of nuclear weapons. His speech ended with, *"The end of further experiments with atom bombs would be like the dawn of the rising sun of hope longed for by our long-suffering humankind."*

Although no longer practising medicine, he continued to oversee the hospital until his death at the age of 90 in **1965**. By this time there were 72 buildings, with beds for six hundred patients, and the staff comprised 6 doctors and 35 nurses. He passed the administration of the hospital to his daughter Rhena. Albert Schweitzer and his wife are buried on the hospital grounds in Lambarene.

Further links, websites and reading:

The links and resources below will allow teachers further background and insights into the philosophy of Reverence for Life and into the continuing work of the many charities inspired by Albert Schweitzer.

There are also links to the coverage of the Rana Plaza disaster, particularly through the BBC.

Websites

The work of the charity Reverence for Life UK – www.reverenceforlife.org.uk

The Philosophy of Reverence for Life – [www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reverence for Life](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reverence_for_Life)

The work of the Lambarene Hospital today – www.schweitzer.org and www.schweitzershospitalfund.org.uk

The Earth Charter – www.earthcharteruk.org

The Rana Plaza Building disaster - [www.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013 Savar building collapse](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013_Savar_building_collapse)

BBC coverage of the Rana Plaza disaster 3 months on (with links to other earlier coverage)
– www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-24649848

‘Dying for a Bargain’ - A Panorama investigation into the hidden world and human cost of cheap garment manufacture - www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-24200485

The BBC website has a large number of reports about the Rana Plaza disaster and the story of Reshma Begum, accessed by typing Rana Plaza into the search box on the BBC homepage

Books

Reverence for Life: The Ethics of Albert Schweitzer for the Twenty-First Century (The Albert Schweitzer library) - Marvin Meyer (Editor), Kurt Bergel (Editor)

This book explores Schweitzer's system of ethics as a way of life in which individuals live with compassion and respect for all living things - humans, animals and plants through a series of essays by Schweitzer and renowned contemporary Schweitzer scholars from around the globe.

The New Rationalism: Albert Schweitzer's Philosophy of Reverence for Life – David K. Goodin

David Goodin explores the underlying philosophy behind Schweitzer's ethic of compassion, presenting it as a response to contemporary questions in social justice, economic equality, and environmental action, showing where his theories can provide a framework for both environmental and civic ethics today.

Reverence for Life: Albert Schweitzer's Great Contribution to Ethical Thought – Ara Paul Barsam

By throwing light on the origin and development of Schweitzer's thought, Barsam leads his readers to a closer appreciation of the contribution that reverence makes to current ethical issues. Whereas previous commentators have focused on "reverence for life" as a philosophical ethic located in that tradition, this book demonstrates that it is in fact Schweitzer's theology that provides the foundation for his ethic.

Albert Schweitzer: A Biography - James Brabazon

Of all the many biographies which have been written of her father's life, Mme Rhena Schweitzer declared this to be the best. A limited number of copies of the 2000 Second Edition can be obtained from Vreni Mark at Kenwood Cottage, Croydon near Royston, Herts, SG8 0DR or via email vreni.mark@btinternet.com