

Association of Christian Teachers (ACT)

www.christians-in-education.org.uk

Briefing Paper 2: Religious Education

What is Religious Education?

Religious Education (RE) can be understood in two different ways. It can mean the kind of education that a religious body (a church or mosque or synagogue) provides. Alternatively, it is the name for a subject on the curriculum in schools. Here it suggests pupils are learning *about* and *from* religion/belief, rather than being indoctrinated *into* a particular religious or secular worldview.

The existence of religious schools within the national 'maintained' (state-funded) system of education in England tends to confuse these two meanings. There are, broadly speaking, two kinds of maintained schools:

- i. 'faith foundation schools' which are run by religious bodies and do have a distinctive religious character – these include 'voluntary aided schools', 'voluntary controlled schools' and some 'academies'; and
- ii. 'community schools' which are *not* run by religious bodies and do *not* have a distinctive religious character.

A further complication is the existence in England of a kind of 'cultural Christianity' which belongs to no particular Christian denomination. It is held (quite rightly) to be important in shaping public expectation and it finds expression on formal and ceremonial occasions, and in many current debates about society and morality. It takes many different cultural forms in art, music, architecture, literature and poetry, which are characteristic of past and contemporary English society.

We recognise this and take it to be a significant argument for the importance of Christianity in any programme of RE. The existence of such an interpretation of the Christian faith requires that whatever the explicit or nominal religious background of the pupils, they all have the right to know what Christianity is, its origins, the principal varieties of belief and practice, and its impact on the world around them

The 1988 Education Reform Act requires a curriculum that promotes the spiritual development of pupils. All maintained schools (whether 'faith foundation' or 'community') are required to provide all pupils with a curriculum that:

- is balanced and broadly-based;
- includes, in addition to the National Curriculum, RE and, for secondary pupils, sex and relationships education, and careers education;
- promotes spiritual, moral, cultural, intellectual and physical development;
- prepares pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life.

Understanding religious and secular worldviews

RE is the only aspect of the statutory (i.e. legally prescribed) curriculum that is determined locally. Each maintained school's RE curriculum must be consistent with the 'agreed syllabus' set and monitored by the relevant Local Authority SACRE (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education). Agreed syllabi are shaped by:

- a) local needs and priorities – as defined by the local SACRE;
- b) the 1988 Education Reform Act;
- c) *The Non-Statutory National Framework for Religious Education* (QCA, 2004).

The 1988 Education Reform Act makes it clear that study of Christianity should be included in every RE programme. The QCA *Framework* recommends that RE should involve the study of Christianity plus one other religion/belief system per term/year in primary schools; the 'other' may relate to local religious (or non-religious) diversity.

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The *Framework* – which is supported by the Association of Christian Teachers, the British Humanist Association, all mainstream Christian denominations, other faith communities and the RE Council of England and Wales – says: ‘Many pupils come from religious backgrounds but others have no attachment to religious beliefs and practices. Therefore, to ensure that all pupils’ voices are heard and that the RE curriculum is broad and balanced, it is recommended that there should be opportunities for all pupils to study ... a secular world view, where appropriate’ (p.12).

Pupils should be encouraged to reflect on their own developing pattern of beliefs and values: learning *from* religions/belief systems – as well as learning *about* religions/belief systems – in a context where reverence for truth, respect for the integrity of other people and a sense of responsibility towards the community are the guiding principles. In this way RE will contribute to the spiritual, moral, social and personal development of pupils.

It is not a necessary part of education as far as schooling is concerned that pupils should reach any particular religious or non-religious commitment. At the same time an interest in religious questions will obviously help pupils to become educated in this subject, and we would expect an educated person to see the point of religious commitment whether or not she/he shared such a commitment. In addition, if the content of RE is to be more than a sequence of equally insignificant facts, pupils will develop their own religious awareness. This is the kind of awareness often seen in the questions pupils ask about the ultimate meaning and point of life.

It should be stressed, however, that no school should be expected to assume sole responsibility for spiritual development and/or religious upbringing. At the very least this is an enterprise shared with faith communities and families. The ultimate responsibility for spiritual development and religious upbringing, however, lies with a child’s parents.

Religious literacy

It is important for RE to consider, and be sensitive to, the context of the school and the cultural and religious backgrounds of pupils with the aim of encouraging them to regard people of different religions/beliefs as worthy of respect. Hence, RE has a valuable role in helping pupils of all kinds to handle the religious pluralism that characterises England today. This requires ‘religious literacy’, i.e. the development of skills that enable pupils to recognise and handle religious language and concepts appropriately. When RE is well-taught and well-learned it helps combat prejudice and discrimination by promoting mutual understanding and respect, and social harmony and community cohesion.

The QCA *Framework* states that RE should actively promote truth, justice and respect (QCA, 2004, p. 8). But, in order for this to happen, there first needs to be a tacit acknowledgement that each religion/belief system has its own distinctive and sometimes exclusive truth claims. Humanism states there is no God; Hinduism disagrees. Christianity asserts that Jesus Christ is the Son of God; Islam does not concur.

RE should never be about ‘ignoring the elephant in the room’ or ‘papering over the cracks’. Any authentic study of a religion or belief system will include reference to what sets it apart from other religions and belief systems. RE is as much about understanding difference, conflict and disagreement, as it is about identifying similarity, harmony and concord. The QCA *Framework* puts it this way: ‘Religious education ... places specific emphasis on ... the celebration of diversity in society through understanding similarities and differences’ (QCA, 2004, p. 8).

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A religiously literate person is one who:

- a) demonstrates an awareness of what life looks like from both theistic and atheistic points of view;
- b) knows and understands the central determining features of certain religions (e.g. Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, Hinduism) and secular ideologies (e.g. humanism);
- c) recognises religious and secular worldviews in practices and ideas (e.g. relating to the natural environment) and has some grasp of what makes each religion/belief system what it is;
- d) appreciates the principal effects of each religion/belief system in terms of the values, attitudes and impact it generates in individuals, families and communities;
- e) values the development of their own religious insight;
- f) values the development of religious insight for other people.

The question of method

In the period 1988-2004 (i.e. prior to the publication of the *QCA Framework*), RE was often taught thematically, especially in the primary age range. Half-termly RE topics with titles like 'water', 'light', 'holy books', 'places of worship' or 'rites of passage' were used as vehicles for comparing and contrasting beliefs and practices of several (and sometimes all six) of the major theistic world religions. Unsurprisingly, this often led to overload and confusion for KS1 and KS2 teachers and pupils alike.

Even at KS3 and KS4, where thematic teaching may be more age-appropriate, RE needs to be carefully planned and appropriately resourced. If it is not, RE can end up being ineffectual and misleading, especially if it imposes an artificial framework which implies that all religious practices which have the same name (like 'prayer' or 'meditation') are the same activity in the different religions, or if it blends together mutually exclusive religious ideas.

The challenge for all teachers of all areas of the curriculum is how to bring specific subject matter alive. Two very popular and often successful strategies are:

- i. School visits to places of worship; and
- ii. Visits to school by authentic practitioners of religions being studied. Sometimes this can be more illuminating if, instead of inviting the local Rabbi, Imam or Methodist Minister to talk about their role, a 'regular' Jewish/Muslim/Christian lawyer, business person, police officer or vet is invited to speak about how they live out their faith in everyday life.

The kinds of direct experience that should *not* be included are:

1. Activities particularly sacred to a specific religion and recognised by believers as part of their worship life, e.g. a service of Holy Communion.
2. Activities based on beliefs not shared by many pupils or teachers in the class or by the parents of those pupils, e.g. some forms of meditation or rituals.
3. Activities enshrining values which clash strongly with generally held religious (and secular) beliefs and values, e.g. astrology and the occult.

We are not convinced that a parent's right to withdraw their child from RE is sufficient safeguard against participation by some children, especially in primary schools, in these kinds of activities.

For activities of types 1 and 2 (listed above) we would consider that the use of DVDs and web-based materials may help children to deal with these experiences at arm's length and therefore with less threat to their spiritual well-being.

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Participation in activities of type 3, however, should be excluded altogether. It should be stressed that this includes all school activities, whether curricular or extra-curricular. Many Christian, Jewish and Muslim parents, for example, would object if their child was required to:

- paint a Hallowe'en mask in Art;
- make a ouija board in Design Technology;
- write magic spells or horoscope entries in English/Literacy;
- dress up as a devil for a school Hallowe'en assembly or party;
- write horoscope entries for a school magazine.

(NB: the above are real-life examples brought to the attention of ACT staff in recent years.)

The Christian teacher of RE

It is not essential to be a committed Christian to teach RE, but the committed Christian teacher brings certain advantages, e.g.

1. a teacher is an example of one who takes religion seriously;
2. a teacher has the opportunity to deal with what she/he regards as of the greatest significance – and therefore should be able to communicate a degree of enthusiasm for the subject;
3. a teacher should appreciate how strongly those adherents of other faiths feel about their most deeply cherished beliefs and practices – and so be able to handle these with sensitivity and insight.

Consequently, RE teaching can be a Christian vocation and a highly professional service at the same time. The witness of a Christian teacher of RE may be subjected to a greater scrutiny by pupils and colleagues, and she/he will scrupulously avoid evangelising in the classroom, but a Christian presence in this vital area of beliefs and values is a prime example of the role of Christian discipleship and witness to the world.

A call for more resources

In spite of all the public debate and political lobbying, RE continues to be under-resourced in terms of qualified staff, time on the school timetable and finance to buy equipment and materials. Most primary and many secondary teachers continue to be non-specialist staff in RE at a time when the demands of the subject have become more complex. Some efforts are being made through in-service training to increase the confidence and competence of existing teaching assistants and teachers.

In view of the place of RE in the 1944 and 1988 Education Acts which determine the provision of education in this country, the subject must be given: (i) more generous financial support from school budgets; (ii) well-equipped specialist rooms in secondary schools and resource areas in primary schools; (iii) more staff trained or retrained to teach it; and (iv) advisory staff appointed by local authorities to work in conjunction with the relevant SACRE to monitor and improve RE provision for every pupil in every maintained school.