

The National Framework for Religious Education

'This framework has been produced for the national improvement of religious education. It is strongly commended for use as early as possible.'¹

Launched

The National Non-Statutory Framework for Religious Education was published by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) on 28 October 2004. This major government initiative in RE has been hailed as a major achievement and a landmark for Religious Education. It signals that the government is serious about the place of the subject in the school curriculum. The *Framework* has the approval of the teaching profession, an impressive list of churches, other faiths and the British Humanist Association. Many feel that the subject has, at last, arrived.

The idea for a national framework was put forward at the St Gabriel's Conference in 2000. Following consultation a feasibility study was undertaken and, after some delay, approval given by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). A draft *Framework* was issued in April 2004 and the final version was launched just six months later.

The problem

Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education) has reported serious weaknesses in RE. Pupils make slower progress in RE than in any other subject, particularly at KS3. There is often no path through the curriculum. The subject is often little more than a list of disparate topics resulting in long-term confusion and lack of retention. Some teachers are unsure of how to teach the subject. Children arrive in KS3 with very different experiences of RE. Some schools simply do not teach it at all. Added to this, the citizenship orders have made many wonder if RE has a future in non-church schools.

The framework

At Foundation level, the framework gives examples of RE-related experiences which relate to four of the early learning goals. It is acknowledged that RE is not compulsory for children in nursery classes.

The structure for key stages 1–3 follows the same format as the National Curriculum programmes of study with sections on knowledge, skills and understanding and breadth of study. Knowledge, skills and understanding are structured under the two well-known headings of *Learning about Religion* (hitherto 'Religions' – plural) and *Learning from*



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Religion. Here religion is treated as an entity which can be studied across the religions. Pupils 'investigate the significance of religion' and 'consider religious and spiritual feelings, experiences and concepts such as worship, wonder, praise, thanks, concern, joy and sadness'. Religion is understood as being what 'some people do' and pupils learn to appreciate its diversity and similarity, through stories, beliefs, texts, ultimate questions, symbols. The breadth of study sections set out the areas of study through which the knowledge, understanding and skills are to be taught. At every key stage pupils learn through Christianity, at least one other principal religion (five by the end of KS3), a religious community with a significant local presence and a secular world view (the last two areas 'where appropriate'). Pupils are to be taught the knowledge, understanding and skills through themes; beliefs, stories, celebrations, symbols and also through experiences and opportunities; visits to places of worship, having times of reflection, beginning to use ICT.

At key stages 4 and 5, statements to do with learning 'about' and 'from' religion are set out but there are no 'breadth of study' sections. It is recommended that pupils are offered courses that lead to accreditation.

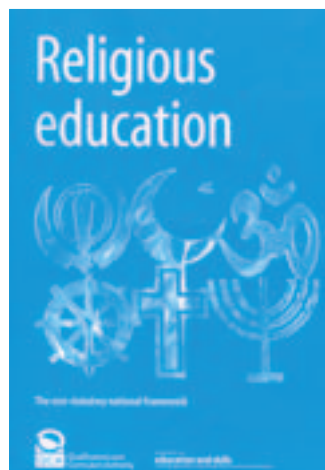
Attitudes, assessment, inclusion and general teaching requirements are covered, along with how RE contributes to SMSC (Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural education), key skills and thinking skills.

Interpretation

The *Framework* offers a great deal of scope for religious educators. Much will depend on how syllabus conferences interpret the *Framework*. Some may see the inclusion of themes as a retrograde step, reminiscent of the 1970s. On the other hand it could allow for concentration on those areas which enable religious traditions to be mutually supportive against secularism.

One area that an agreed syllabus conference will need to address is what view of religion its syllabus should adopt. The *Framework* runs with

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Charles Clarke,
Secretary of State for
Education, speaking
at the launch of the
RE Framework.



different (and unstated) views of what religion is. On the one hand, religion is used to refer to activities which involve places of worship, sacred texts, the divine, symbols, etc. On the other hand, it is sometimes used in the broader sense, to indicate any system of belief. Secular philosophies fit with the latter definition, but not the former. It explains, for example, the fact that the National Secular Society² rejects the *Framework* as a 'charter for indoctrination', teaching 'religion as a truth to be embraced and practised' while the British Humanist Association³ applauds the *Framework* because it places secular worldviews alongside religions.

Secular philosophies

It is worth noting at this point that the word 'atheism' does not appear in *The National Non-Statutory Framework for Religious Education* at all. Nevertheless, the recommendation that secular philosophies should be studied at all key stages needs care.

Circular 1/94 (paragraph 104) advises that the 'inclusion of representatives of belief systems such as humanism, which do not amount to a religion or religious denomination, on committee A of an agreed syllabus conference or group A of a SACRE' (Standing Advisory Committee on Religious Education) would be contrary to law. When a challenge was made to the Birmingham agreed syllabus in the mid 1970s, legal opinion ruled that a non-religious system of belief could be

included only in so far as it threw light on religious life, not in its own right. It may be therefore that the inclusion of the words 'where appropriate' indicates that a teacher should refer to a secular philosophy as a way of showing something deep and interesting about religious life or in the way that it challenges religious life to be clear and committed to truth. Certainly the attainment targets generally relate to understanding of religious issues such as sacred writings, worship and symbols, rather than the sort of understanding that can be gained through study of a secular philosophy.

National norms

The *Framework* is intended to contribute to a coherent curriculum that promotes continuity. But the *Framework* neither advises which religions to study at which key stages, nor which aspects of which religions. It could have given advice in relation to Christianity since the faith is studied at every stage, but this opportunity has not been taken. The only way continuity across schools could be achieved is by making RE a national curriculum subject, thus doing away with the local agreed syllabus conferences. The weakness of the *Framework* in this respect may be used to argue for moving towards nationally agreed norms. Much of the advice (it is non-statutory) is not new and one wonders if its reiteration can raise standards. Whether the local conference is the place to hammer out central questions about RE or whether we should trust a group appointed by the DfES is a moot question. Many would prefer the former.

■ Penny Thompson

Footnotes

- 1 See www.qca.org.uk
- 2 See www.secularism.org
- 3 See www.humanism.org

On the Edge of
Exmoor, Devon:
+ Climbing Wall
+ Sports Hall
+ Pitches
+ 280 acres
+ Farm
+ Woodland
+ Private Beach

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