

THE FUTURE FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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Context

Religious education has evolved unrecognisably over time and needs to change significantly if it is to continue to justify its place in the curriculum in future - something one must hope for as it is potentially of immense value. The challenge is obvious. Religious practice¹, belief² and affiliation³ have all declined inexorably over the last many decades. These trends have been especially marked among younger people - indeed the decline in belief is generational rather than a matter of individuals changing their convictions.⁴

This could be taken as an indicator that religious education is past its sell-by date, justified only by tradition and maintained only by inertia. This judgement is indeed entirely justified of the sort of religious instruction that was originally mandated in the 1944 Education Act when, with belief already declining, as an act of piety after a disruptive and morally disturbing war and as part of a deal with the churches by which their schools were finally amalgamated with those provided by local authorities, it was agreed that all pupils should receive a non-denominational induction into the Christian religion.⁵ Such controversial RI is still provided in many so-called faith schools - but I take it that is not the focus of the present

¹ Brierley Consultancy states a decline in church attendance for the period 1980-2015 from 11.8% to 5.0% of the population, with England at 4.7%, Wales 4.8%, and Scotland 8.9%. See <https://faithsurvey.co.uk/download/gb-church-attendance-1980-2015.pdf>

² British Social Attitudes has shown a decline in the percentage of the UK population describing themselves as Christians from 65.2% in 1983 to 41.7% in 2013, while those belonging to no religion rose from 31.4% to 50.6% (31st report, 2014). YouGov ran an online poll among a sample of 1,595 adults on 18-19 December 2016. Belief in God or a higher spiritual power was expressed by 28%, four points less than in February 2015, while avowed disbelief had risen over the same period from 33% to 38%. A further 20% believed in some sort of spiritual power but not in God and 14% were unsure what to think. See <http://www.brin.ac.uk/2017/counting-religion-in-britain-december-2016/>

³ The UK Census in 2011 showed a decline compared with 2001 of those owning an affiliation to any religion from 77.5% to 67.7% (Christians from 71.7% to 59.3%). Those answering 'no religion' rose from 14.8% to 25.1%. The shallowness of the affiliation to their religion of census Christians was shown by an Ipsos MORI poll in which only 10% picked religion as source for right/wrong; only 35%, offered a choice of Matthew, Genesis, Acts and Psalms, chose Matthew as first book of the New Testament; and 26% of whom had not been to church for at least ten years. See <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2921/Religious-and-Social-Attitudes-of-U-K-Christians-in-2011.aspx>

⁴ "[I]n Britain in recent decades, change has occurred because each generation has entered adulthood less religious than its predecessors" - Voas, D. & Crockett, A. (2005). Religion in Britain: Neither believing nor belonging. *Sociology*, 39 (1).

⁵ The change is of course all the more marked from 1811 when the Church of England defined the purpose of the newly founded National Society as 'to instruct and educate the Poor in suitable learning, works of industry and the principles of the Christian Religion according to the Established Church' - Lois Loudon, *Distinctive and Inclusive: The National Society and Church of England Schools 1811-2011* (London: The National Society, 2012).

enquiry.

By the 1960s and 1970s teachers of religious education (now increasingly so called) were becoming concerned at their subject's lack of educational validity - and many felt that for this reason they were seen as unprofessional by their colleagues in the staff room. Efforts to improve the educational standing of the subject saw the disappearance of its instructional mode and the widening of its scope to embrace at least to some extent the non-Christian religions that were becoming more common as a result of immigration. The implicit understanding was that any religion was better than none.⁶ The incompatibility of religion and atheism was allowed a marginal mention, the conflict between the different religions in their insulated silos was out of bounds.

What should be included in the scope and content of RE?

Today those trends have reached their culmination. Instruction is a thing of the past. The so-called six world religions figure in all syllabuses. But new concerns have arisen. One is the failure of almost all syllabuses to include non-religious beliefs on level terms with the religions. This was the crux on which the 1974 draft Birmingham agreed syllabus fell down, leading to the British Humanist Association's publication of *Objective, Fair and Balanced* (1975) whose title states its demands clearly enough: that RE should be:

- Objective - in contrast to persuading children to believe in Christianity, the intention should be educational, to impart knowledge about its subject matter;
- Fair - because even objective statements about religions and beliefs could be selective and so give a biased unfair picture; and
- Balanced - because the course as a whole needed to give a balanced and proportionate picture of the whole field of religion and belief, including non-religious beliefs such as Humanism.

Extraordinarily, despite wide recognition of the strength of these arguments, not least at an early stage by the Religious Education Council, still 40 years later Humanism, as the principal if not only sufficiently articulated and populated non-religious belief in the UK, remains marginal in most syllabuses. Indeed, although the basis on which the Department for Education lost a judicial review in the High Court⁷ was that human rights law required Humanism to be given equal respect in 'RE' as any religion, the Department has utterly and deliberately ignored that underlying argument and proposes to go blithely forward without reform, giving schools and local authorities guidance that is legally grossly misleading.⁸

⁶ Similarly around this time a High Court judge observed that "As between different religions, the law stands neutral, but it assumes that any religion is at least likely to be better than none" (*Neville Estates v. Madden* [1962] Ch. 832 at 853).

⁷ [2015] EWHC 3404 (Admin) - see <https://www.judiciary.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/r-fox-v-ssfe.pdf>

⁸ See my paper at www.thinkingabouthumanism.org/miscellany/objective-critical-and-pluralistic/

But there is a more fundamental doubt about the validity of the subject and the justification for its place in the curriculum. At present the most common approach is to divide the time available between the several beliefs and to teach them on their own terms, more or less uncritically and often with a plethora of confusingly obscure theological terminology. Children are offered a smorgasbord of different belief systems without guidance how to assess them or choose between them. This term it is Christianity, next it will be Buddhism. Even if the High Court's judgement were taken with the utmost seriousness and all syllabuses henceforth gave proportionate consideration and equal respect to Humanism, this problem would only be exacerbated. A thematic approach to the subject, allowing study of different religions and beliefs alongside each other, would therefore be much preferable to the more common systematic approach, but that in itself will not be enough.

Religion is after all unlike the material covered in all other subjects: unlike the sciences there is no agreed standard for assessing its claims, and unlike the arts, where disagreement is expected in judgements of merit, it does actually make truth claims - claims that are theoretically fundamental to the way one should live one's life. Including Humanism would make no difference to this problem, only deepen it.

What do you consider to be the main aims and purposes of RE?

Should RE then be abandoned? After all, neither in the USA nor in France is religion studied in school. Almost no-one in this country takes that view, and for good reason. Religion, despite the decline in belief and practice, remains immensely important for reasons that are historical, cultural, social, political and philosophical. An education that omits these aspects of religion and belief must be wanting. Consider:

- **Historical** The history of western Europe has been shaped on the anvil of religion, and its culture is replete with religious references, principally to Christianity. British history likewise, from the break with Rome and the emergence of the Church of England to the gunpowder plot, the civil war and the 'glorious revolution', from the battle over Catholic emancipation to the troubles in Ireland. Similar considerations apply when our focus is widened to other continents and religions. Well-rounded adults need at least some acquaintance with this religious background to life in their country.
- **Cultural** Art, music, literature, the English language itself cannot be fully understood without some knowledge of stories that originate in the Old and New Testaments and in the subsequent development of Christian theology. Knowledge that was commonplace in mediaeval times - that a carving in the cloisters of a man with a lion must be St Mark, for example - is scarcely needed today by the average adult, but without an awareness of the Passion story you can scarcely be considered adequately educated. Moreover, some awareness is increasingly needed of key references also from other religions.
- **Social** The Christian churches continue to shape important aspects of society and have now been joined by the religions of our more recently arrived citizens. They run schools and charitable organisations, they provide a focus for life in villages and (less

so) in towns, they are present - sometimes in a dominant role - in many national ceremonies and occasions. Similarly, with a far more diverse population than ever, those of us with deep roots in this country live today in close daily proximity with people who - much to our present embarrassment - would not long ago have been seen as exotic and disparaged as heathen or pagan.⁹ Many of the social attitudes and practices of some relatively recent arrivals do indeed differ from received British attitudes in ways that are often determined by their religious beliefs. Social cohesion requires that both the old and the new populations at least learn sufficiently about each other's ways to avoid offence and preferably come to appreciate each other enough to establish ordinary good relations if not go further into mutual sympathy and understanding. Schools have a front-line responsibility here and RE is one place for that to be borne.

- **Political** Religion has an importance today in the political as well as the social sphere. At home there are debates about the extent to which so-called 'British values' should be enforced, about the place of religion in society and basic issues of secularism - for example, religious rights to exemption from some equality laws. Here and abroad there are conflicts that can only be understood if their religious roots or rationales are understood: the continuing difficulties in Northern Ireland, the insoluble problems of Israel and Palestine, Islamism in Pakistan, Bangla Desh and west Africa, Hindu nationalism in India, Buddhist suprematism in Myanmar, and so on. Schools may not need to go into any detail but with so much of politics concerned with religious extremism and terrorism they need to ensure a basic understanding of the issues.
- **Philosophical** Above all, religions and beliefs provide the basis for finding meaning in life and a theoretical underpinning for how to behave. RE can seek to answer questions such as what is religion? how can it have such influence? how do religions originate and develop? what do they have in common and how do they differ? (This would cover the difference between orthodoxy and orthopraxy, and the schisms in the main religions, such as between Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant, or between Sunni and Shia.) RE can further ask what are the benefits and dangers of committing to a religion or belief? How should one go about assessing its validity or truth? These are profound questions but well within the capacity of most young people to approach given open-minded and fair guidance by their schools. RE can also provide a forum for looking at the nature of rules and morality, the arguments about public ethical questions posed by war, crime, prejudice, scientific advances like genetic manipulation, issues arising at the beginning and end of life, and so on. Tackling such questions provides an invaluable introduction to thinking skills as well as contributing to pupils' understanding of each other.

There is then no lack of educationally relevant subject matter that can properly find its way into an RE syllabus. It needs to reflect the facts that in today's society religion is no longer a

⁹ The Franco-British exhibition of 1908 at the White City was not unusual in including a French Senegalese village, complete with imported 'natives' for visitors to watch as if they were animals in a zoo. - see <http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/white-city-exhibitions>

matter of shared beliefs, albeit of fading relevance, but one of vigorously disputed ideas with a high degree of relevance to ordinary life and politics. Designing a suitable syllabus undoubtedly offers major problems but not, I suggest, insuperable ones. As an example of original thinking about RE that covers many (but not all) of the areas I have proposed as necessary, I attach with her permission an admirable outline devised by an RE teacher, Brenna Hughes, and implemented by her in her secondary school.

How should the development of RE standards, curricula, or syllabuses be best organised?

It is impossible, however, to see such a syllabus being prepared by our present Agreed Syllabus Conferences, which have their roots in the pre-war world of religious instruction and the 1944 settlement where these local conferences facilitated a wary watch on each other by (principally) Anglicans and Non-Conformists to ensure that no marches were stolen. Wider educational values were no part of that picture and cannot be served by these essentially political local groups representing four interested parties, only one of which (the teachers) has any professional standing.¹⁰

A syllabus for RE on the lines I propose should rather be the responsibility of educational professionals at national level. The place of representatives of individual religions and beliefs should be limited to vetting the accuracy of the what is said about their own beliefs. The draft should of course be subject to public consultation as with any National Curriculum subject, but the criteria by which it should be judged cannot be those that the individual religions plainly brought to (for example) the 2005 non-statutory national framework¹¹ of ensuring the maximum possible coverage of each of their faiths on its own terms without reference to history, social context, other faiths, impact on society or indeed anything outside its own teaching.

Subject name

Lastly, it scarcely needs saying that 'religious education' is no longer an adequate name for the subject, which if approached on the lines set out above must surely be one of absorbing interest for most pupils and certainly one of importance to society. A better name would be "Beliefs and Values".

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¹⁰ There is no reason why the local Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) should not continue if there is sufficient local support. They would have a role of guarding against neglect of the subject and of providing liaison for RE teachers with local belief communities.

¹¹ See http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20090903160937/http://qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/9817_re_national_framework_04.pdf