

Commission on Religion and Belief in Public Life: response from the RE Council

A. General Questions:

1. **Do you feel at ease with the diversity of modern British society in terms of religion and belief?**

Yes.

2. **Are the current systems of civil and criminal law in the UK satisfactory in relation to issues of religion and belief, and to the overlap between these and issues of race and ethnicity?**

It is difficult to know how far the Public Sector Equality Duty is met.

3. **Do the media accurately and helpfully portray issues of religion and belief, and communities and groups identified by religion or belief?**

No, they do not. Religion is frequently portrayed as only being problematic within a pathological perspective; there is insufficient emphasis on the positive benefits that religious and belief communities bring to their communities, local, nationally and globally, including also the challenge made by religious ethical principles to the way our society is run. Further, there is a tendency to homogenise religions as if they contained no internal diversity. This is extremely damaging and dangerous. Even when the media try to be fair to religions and beliefs they frequently display extraordinary ignorance – an article on the wearing of a headscarf (described as hijab, a word which has a much wider meaning) for example, may be accompanied by a woman wearing a face veil. There is a general lack of religious literacy in the print and visual media.

4. **Are issues of religion and belief well handled in the curricula of the UK's systems of education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, and in relevant systems of training and continuing development?**

There is considerable variation in the quality of religious education as a formal curriculum subject and Ofsted reports provide evidence of this – often largely ignored.

There has been a considerable neglect of RE in the training of primary school teachers, both initial and continuing professional development and at secondary level there are too many non-specialists teaching the subject with too few resources and inadequate support. This has been documented in the [report we](#)

prepared on behalf of the All Party Parliamentary Group on RE (2013) which found, for example, that most primary trainees had minimal preparation for teaching RE during their training and that 50% of them lacked confidence in this subject. Continuing professional development for both primary and secondary was described as 'a postcode lottery' with very many teachers receiving little or absolutely no CPD to compensate for their lack of initial training. The situation was different though not substantially better in secondary schools, where around 50% of lessons were taught by people who were not RE specialists. Given the challenge of teaching accurately and interestingly about religions and beliefs in all their diversity, this lack of initial training and professional development is a scandal.

The inadequate provision for training in the teaching of RE is an issue in both HE based and school based training routes. In the latter case, if a school has poor RE itself, it is in no position to train the next generation of teachers in good practice.

More generally, religion is often neglected in schools with insufficient understanding of local religious and belief communities. Visits to and by faith and belief organisations should play a much larger part in the school curriculum and in teacher / staff training.

5. Should faith-based organisations be involved in social and political action and, if so, in what ways and to what extent?

Of course, preferably in collaboration with each other.

B. Education and Training Questions:

1. How should disagreements be handled between and within different traditions and communities, and between these and other interests in public life and wider society?

These are best handled at local, community level but this requires trained, specialist community development and youth workers at a time when local authority resources are being seriously reduced. National initiatives may lack sufficient nuance - local knowledge is needed. Research by Charles Husband and Yunis Alam, for example, on social cohesion and counter-terrorism in West Yorkshire local authorities demonstrated this very clearly (2011)

2. Are current syllabuses for education about religions and beliefs in primary and secondary schools, including religious schools, appropriate and adequate? If not, what needs to be added or modified?

In some local authorities they are and in others they are not. The variation is generally due to the amount of specialist support given to agreed syllabus conferences. With the increasing fragmentation of the school system when academies can choose which local agreed syllabus they follow it is difficult to monitor the quality of RE in those schools. The law and funding agreements make this a complex area.

3. With regard to matters of religion and belief, what general principles should guide the teaching of history and citizenship education in schools, and the

teaching of literature and the other arts?

Teachers addressing matters of religion and belief in subject areas other than RE should have the tools to do the job properly i.e. reliable, accurate resources and at least a modest level of training or preparation by the RE subject leader in their school.

4. What should be the role of religion and belief organisations in relation to the running of state school systems?

The present legal system has strengths though there should be a review of the legal basis on which SACREs and ASCs are set up.

REC member organizations are not of one mind on this issue; for some, faith based participation in the running of schools is a reflection of the essential right of parents and communities to bring up children in their own tradition, whilst for others it is a reflection of religious privilege being inappropriately funded by the tax payer who may or may not subscribe to religious principles.

5. Should the state education system be permitted to select pupils and staff on grounds of religion or belief?

See answer to previous question. In voluntary aided schools as in all others, there should be a demonstration of active commitment to equality, cohesion and a broad and balanced RE that includes the principal religions represented in GB.

6. What is and what should be the place of religion and belief on campuses of higher and further education?

These need to be viewed separately, depending on whether students are still in compulsory education. If they are, then there should be a duty to promote SMSC and religious and moral education should be part of the curriculum of all students. In post-compulsory education, there should be provision and support for voluntary religious and belief groups.

7. In continuing professional development (CPD) in a range of occupations, what general principles should guide coverage of matters of religion and belief?

A recognition that we all live in a global world and understanding of religious and ethnic diversity, including religious and non religious worldviews, should be increased to enable meaningful relationships and dialogue to develop, along with sensitivity in relation to religious, social and cultural mores.

8. What recommendations relating to education and training should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?

There is a need for both increased religious and media literacy to enable an informed and critical understanding of religious and belief communities. The increase in Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and a general negative stereotyping of religiosity are all serious phenomena that require urgent action if we are to be a fair and inclusive society.

A particularly pressing need is for the recognition of an urgent increase and improvement in the quantity and quality of training for those who will be teaching RE, and of their post qualification professional development.