

To the Commissioners,

Contained below are responses to questions relating to Religious Education in schools:

1. 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?

Current syllabuses are constructed around the requirements of the 1988 Education Reform Act and locally interpreted. National guidance has been available for Agreed Syllabus Conferences since the National Model Syllabuses of 1994, the National Framework for RE in 2004 (NFRE) and the National Curriculum Framework for Religious Education in 2013 (NCFRE). One of the key issues that has arisen over time is that the guidance produced since 2004, including the 2010 guidance from DCSF, has tried to modify RE without modifying the law. This has led to a peculiar set of expectations on the part of some religious and belief groups not backed by legislation, as can be seen in the Rose Review of the Primary Curriculum (abandoned by the current government in 2010) and its' programme of study for religious education and the earlier 2007 secondary curriculum review that was put on-line via QCA/QCDA. The trouble is there isn't sufficient curriculum time to do justice to all those who want to be a part of RE, or have their claim to be part of RE legitimised by their presence in official documents.

Therefore, in light with Ofsted's findings in 2013 and that of the Does RE Work? (also 2013) research led by Professor James Conroy (University of Glasgow), there is a profound crisis about what religious education is meant to do in the curriculum in non-denominational schools or schools without a specifically religious character. On that point it is unhelpful to talk about faith and non-faith schools or religious and secular schools. This is not a distinction in law. There is a distinction between the secular and religious curricula (see the 1944, 1988, 1996 Education Act headings) which is useful. Given that Head of State is also the Head of the Church (supreme governor of the Church of England) all schools are 'faith' schools and that is why they have both religious education and collective worship – and why both are in the main (RE) or wholly or in the main (Collective Worship) Christian. When the term 'broadly Christian' is used in collective worship this refers not to something vague and nice but something not specifically denominational, see Circular 1/94 (England).

One of the things that emerged from 2004 onwards was the desire to have greater breadth in RE. This had the impact of reducing the expectation that pupils would learn something in depth over time. This was further compounded by the levels in the

NFRE which focussed on skill acquisition and demonstration. Hence it was possible to show high attainment without the expectation that pupils would learn anything concrete in terms of knowledge and understanding. The NCFRE hasn't helped this in that the examples used give the impression that content is arbitrary. Ofsted is correct in its assessment (2013) that pupils leave school with little or no knowledge as a result of their RE in most schools.

█ responded to this in a particular way with its agreed syllabus in 2000 and 2005 where it purposefully cut the number of religions to be taught alongside Christianity in any key stage and specified what those religions should be. This did have a positive impact on attainment in RE, especially in the Primary phase. In 2011 the Agreed Syllabus was radically changed from one that did not specify content to one which was clear on expectations about the knowledge to be acquired in RE. This was enhanced in the 2014 syllabus for █ schools, see attached.

What this means in practice is that pupils will not have an equal exposure to each non-Christian religion in each key stage but they will have exposure over time to all the principal religions represented in Great Britain throughout their school career. They may even encounter non-principal religions (although what constitutes a principal religion is decided by each Agreed Syllabus Conference), especially at Key Stage 3. This narrowing down is necessary if religious education is to be anything other than tokenism. The trouble is everyone wants their religion or belief represented in the syllabus, often at each key stage and this has been encouraged by government over time.

There was a long debate in █ 2010 – 2011 about the place of 'secular world views'. Of course it is possible to be a religious secularist – one who believes in separation between 'church' and 'state', the non-magisterial Reformation. Similarly it is possible to be a religious humanist – humanism starting as a movement within Christianity during the Renaissance, see Mark Vernon's work. What the Conference was clear about was that religions cannot simply be 'reduced' to belief and this made it difficult when seeking to present 'belief' as an alternative to or in comparison with 'religion'. The Syllabus 2011 and 2014 have sections on what would constitute the teaching of a secular world view in terms of content. These are to be used alongside the teaching of a religion (primarily but not exclusively Christianity) so as to add contrast and a point of comparison. If religious education is about 'religion' and Humanism doesn't want to be defined in those terms (although Ninian Smart did categorise it as such in his religious taxonomy of 1969) it is legitimate to ask: why should it be there? What has not helped has been the position taken by some Humanists that pupils need to know that there is an alternative to religions and that

they could choose that over a religion, as this gives the impression that RE is a sort of 'supermarket' for pupils to make a choice – the 'rational' choice being Humanism itself in the experience of the Conference discussions. The syllabus does make a statement about this issue on page 14: **What religious education is not**. This goes back to the issue of the nature and purpose of RE. As Professor Linda Woodhead stated at Cornwall SACRE's annual lecture in 2014: if the Church of England (and other Protestant denominations) believed that pupils were getting a Christian education (or education in Christianity) where pupils identified that as 'their tradition' then it is no wonder that RE is seen to have failed because that is not what most schools thought they were doing (supported by Professor Terence Copley's analysis of the history of RE in England and Wales). In fact few religious educators in the non-denominational sector are asking pupils to make existential or ontological commitments to any sort of belief or practice. Evidence would show (Copley: *Indoctrination, Education and God*, 2005) that teachers in their own minds and practice have secularised RE and the pupils they teach, corroborated by Dr Dan Moulin's research. Hence, when looking at non-religious world views where is the line to be drawn? Marxism and Nazism (under Nietzsche) are included in Smart's *Religious Experience of Mankind* (1969), as is Existentialism, so is it reasonable to include these world views – for they are more than political views as they have specific cosmologies. The same could be said of Neo-Liberalism which itself has an educative project (Reay).

Of course, what has undermined this has been the government's academy process where non-denominational academies no longer have to follow the locally agreed syllabus but may construct their own on the basis of the definition in the 1988 Education Reform Act. Although the DfE does not seem to be holding academies to account for what they are or are not doing as long as they don't appear to be radicalising (or preventing radicalisation) of their pupils.

The question above set for commission needs, in one sense, some sort of proposal about what we think the outcomes for religious education should be. RE, though, was never designed to be an education about religions and belief, see the paragraph below. Given the multiplicity of syllabuses and, often, their lack of clarity about what a religiously education pupil should know and understand, be able to do and have considered we need greater consensus on what we expect schools to deliver. Certainly by narrowing down the expectations on RE in ■■■ we appear to be having better outcomes for pupils. This is in part because teachers themselves can be clearer about the expectations they should have in terms of their own knowledge and understanding. What is clear is that if you expect too much of RE you get little. By being specific about what you want in a focussed way you get more.

There needs to be a further distinction drawn: that between religious education and Religious Studies. The prior (RE) is predicated on a particular view of what it is to be human, it posits (see Raymond Holley 1978) that all people have a religious dimension to their being (see also Smart 1969 and Gearon 2013 – On Holy Ground). In RE we are educating the religious aspect of being human – hence the Attainment Target 2 in many syllabuses based on the National Model Syllabuses and the NFRE as a result of Grimitt's work in the 1980s. If it is the case that we no longer hold the view of the universality of religious experience, or ontological openness to it, then we need to redefine what we mean in terms of what pupil's should be attaining in RE, and what should be expect of them as far as attainment goes. Even the NCFRE which dropped the two attainment targets still retains this view of the purpose of RE. Currently, RE is a hybrid between religious studies and personal development (including Spiritual and Moral development), this may no longer be desirable. If the purpose of RE is to be defined in relation to the acquiring of civic virtue then we need to rethink RE. Religious Studies, though, does need to be a study of a religion or religions and it needs to be an academically rigorous subject.

Finally, RE will always be poor in schools where it is not seen to be a priority and where schools are not held to account, although those schools that are held to account do not seem to be doing any better at the moment – see Making a Difference? A Review of Religious Education in Church of England Schools 2014. We see this increasingly in academies where RE is relegated to 'drop down' days and has become an adjunct to PSHEe and Citizenship. Increasingly the statutory bodies set up to monitor and give advice on RE are being marginalised. SACREs are under severe pressure from budget cuts and professional advice is being serious compromised. Local authorities need to be held to account for not doing more to ensure that their schools are doing what they should do.

What needs to change:

- Greater clarity about the purpose of RE
 - Narrowing down what we expect it to deliver as a result of its stated purpose
 - National and local government need to see it as a priority
2. 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?

Ofsted's evidence is that the teaching about religion in History is better than in RE (see the Making Sense of Religion 2007). Certainly, History teaching should focus on

the role that religious ideas and institutions have had in shaping our national story, both for good and ill. The religious contribution to art and literature, especially that of Christianity, needs to be assured in the curriculum and in the delivery of these subjects. How religious ideas have inspired artists is a rich field of study in its own right. Citizenship is more problematic. Religion in Citizenship teaching is often more associated with 'ethnicity' than 'religion'. It forms part of the respect agenda but often uncritically so. Hence, it needs to present religion as something cross cultural and not always ethnically based whilst recognising that for some religion is integral to their ethnic identity. For this to happen Citizenship teachers need better training and resourcing. In many schools Citizenship teaching has been significantly reduced and as a result it rarely attains the level of sophistication necessary for a proper analysis of modern Britain or the development of civic virtue. In many ways the discussions about British values has not helped – whilst they are of crucial importance. In that British values have been primarily defined in relation to the counter terrorism strategy is of concern, see the Teachers' Standards 2013.

The principles should be:

- A recognition of the role that religions continue to play in the cultural life of Britain.
 - That religions continue to have an impact on communities in differential ways across Britain.
 - That we should not **secularise** 'white' communities and **sacralise** 'minority' communities in the minds of our pupils but have an honest picture of how people construct their identities in relation to the state and each other.
3. What recommendations relating to education and training should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?
- Religion remains a significant force in the lives of many in Britain and has a shaping effect in many communities. Teachers need to be trained to understand this in order to ensure that pupils have appropriate religious education in their contexts.
 - The purpose(s) of religious education should be clarified, as should the purpose of teaching about religion in other areas of the curriculum.
 - A national standard for religious educators should be established which includes clear expectations about their own knowledge and understanding of the subject area.

Please feel free to contact me for any further comment or clarification.

Yours faithfully,

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