

# Religious education reform: mistakes of the past must be avoided

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*Despite many RE teachers doing their best under difficult circumstances, a growing consensus now recognises that religious education in schools needs a rethink. Alastair Lichten looks at the latest report calling for reform.*

This week saw the launch of [REforReal](#) – the latest report advocating for fundamental reform of religious education. The report correctly identifies the problem of a "20th century settlement for a 21st century reality".

Calls for major changes in the approach to religion and belief in schools seem to be coming thick and fast, with the REforReal report coming hot on the heels of a [Faith Debates report](#), which set out recommendations for a new settlement on religion and belief in Schools, and an Arts and Humanities Research Council [review of collective worship and religious observance in schools](#). The RE Council has also announced that it is to undertake its own review of the policy and legal standing of RE. Whether the education secretary Nicky Morgan is listening to any of this is another matter.

The REforReal launch took place a day after the [widely reported](#) (and often misreported) High Court ruling that the Education Secretary had made an "error of law" by leaving non-religious views out of the GCSE syllabus. Perhaps with the exception of the Education Secretary Nicky Morgan, everyone now seems to accept that an understanding of non-religious world views is essential for religious/belief literacy.

The National Secular Society has of course been active in the ongoing debate over the future of religion and belief education in schools and it's encouraging to see consensus moving in a broadly secular direction.

The report calls for a national panel to oversee a new national framework for RE. This offers the most achievable avenue for real reform and for establishing best practice at the national level. However this also poses a real risk of repeating the mistakes of the past if it becomes little more than a national SACRE.

SACREs (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education) are one of the biggest problems with our current approach to RE. One of the mistakes of the Education Reform Act 1988 was to increase the power and prominence of these local committees, who along with an Agreed Syllabus Conference (in many cases made up of the same SACRE members), are responsible for the syllabus and approach to RE within each local authority area. Such bodies give faith representatives disproportionate influence and their quality varies widely.

The SACRE approach is too often about satisfying the demands of competing special interest groups (with a non-voting humanist member sometimes thrown in to represent the views of the non-religious) rather than about providing the best quality education for pupils. The question of the knowledge and skills that good quality religion and belief education should aim to impart is a matter of curriculum design, not a theological debate.

Most contributors to the debate understand that RE has to move away from a biased presentation of specific beliefs to promoting religious (and belief) literacy. In areas of good practice this has largely happened.

In today's globalised world, an understanding of others' beliefs is clearly important. Living together successfully probably requires a certain degree of religion and belief literacy. However, the assumption by some within the RE community that religious illiteracy is demonstrated by or causal of society's growing disinterest or opposition to aspects of religion is entirely wrongheaded. The idea that people would embrace religion if only they understood it better is little more than wishful thinking, more than a little insulting and deeply ignorant of the lived religious and non-religious experiences of many citizens.

Many religious enthusiasts have jumped on the 'religious literacy' bandwagon seeing it as a suitable Trojan horse to promulgate favourable and positive views about religion – with a view to replacing the Christian indoctrination of the 1950's with a softer multi-faithism, with 'humanism' thrown in as a sop to the non-religious. Any trace of this needs to be jumped on by anyone seeking to create a new serious academic subject out of the ashes of RE.

Any new subject must (as the report acknowledges) avoid the problems of overloading that has beset the subject in the past. RE can't be a dumping ground for everyone's personal hobby horse, or for issues that good schools can better address through citizenship education or PSHE.

The inclusion of topics should flow naturally from the agreed educational purpose(s) of the subject – whatever that may be. For me, it should be about enabling pupils to understand contemporary religion and belief issues; the importance and role of faith and belief to many people; and a space to explore the big questions through a host of philosophical approaches. I find it hard, therefore, to understand why we'd try to squeeze more theology into the subject. Latin may inform many modern European languages, but it would be hard to justify squeezing it into a French or German GCSE course.

Perhaps it might be better for theological studies to be offered as a separate GCSE or A-Level voluntary option. Although, if the REforReal report's comments on what young people and other stakeholders find useful/interesting about the subject is anything to go by, it's hard to imagine take up would be high.

The report's authors spent a great deal of effort in canvassing the views of young people, whose rights are often overlooked in the squabbling over RE reform. Given that young people in both faith and non-faith schools have been shown to have similar interests and ideas about what RE should do, any reform must address the discrepancies between the approach, assessment and apparent goals of RE in both faith and non-faith schools.

Almost everyone appears to agree that RE requires a name change, but it would be a mistake to view this as merely a cosmetic change or an opportunity to avoid the negative brand associations RE has amassed, rather than an opportunity for more fundamental reform. Yes, let's teach about religious beliefs, but let's also teach secular ethics and the philosophical approaches that inform the lives and actions of our fellow citizens. Then let students make their own choices.

## **Alastair Lichten**

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