

# A response to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education call for evidence on the importance and development of Religious Literacy

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1. This submission is made by the National Secular Society (NSS). The NSS is a not-for-profit organisation founded in 1866, funded by its members and by donations. It campaigns for a diverse society where all are free to practise their faith, change it, or to have a faith at all. The NSS advocates separation of religion and state and promotes secularism as the best means to create a society in which people of all religions or none can live together fairly and cohesively.

## **What does 'Religious Literacy' mean?**

2. Religious literacy is an ambiguous term that can be used and interpreted in a variety of ways.
3. For some, religious literacy could more accurately be described as 'theological literacy' – a knowledge of the theological doctrine of different religious traditions.
4. For some, religious literacy is about religious knowledge – an understanding and familiarity with a broad range of religious and non-religious beliefs, and how they integrate with individuals' wider beliefs, cultural attitudes and practices, and an understanding of the importance of faith to many people.

5. For others it represents an initiative to promote a more liberal and progressive form of religion. The desire to present religion in a positive light to counter negative perceptions of religion, whether generated by religion's violent/regressive manifestations or perhaps negative reporting or stereotyping, is understandable. This should not, however, be the motivation of those promoting religious literacy.
6. We consider the second form of religious literacy (religious knowledge) discussed above to be the most legitimate and useful definition. While almost all individuals and organisations promoting religious literacy pay lip service to this definition, we are concerned that an equivocation with the third definition is often in play. Some groups seek to use 'religious literacy' as a Trojan horse to advance an agenda of increasing religion's public role and profile, or as a justification for the imposition of religious rituals and practices on children and young people in schools.
7. The vagueness of 'religious literacy' and differing agendas of those promoting it renders the term problematic. Religious knowledge is clearer and we would recommend that this term, or 'religion and belief knowledge', is used in place of 'religious literacy' in educational settings.
8. Throughout this document – unless otherwise made clear and for the purpose of criticising other definitions – we will use the second definition of religious literacy, religious knowledge.

**In what ways does Religious Literacy enrich the lives of individuals and positively affect their engagement with their local community, society and public life?**

9. Religion, and Christianity in particular, represents a significant cultural heritage in the UK, which informs our visual arts, history, and literature, and as such, religious knowledge will inevitably enhance pupils understanding of these other subject areas.

10. In terms of civic engagement, increasing secularity and the diversity of and in religious beliefs means the need to treat people as individual citizens rather than as members of a religion has become even more apparent. Faith-based approaches to promoting civic engagement and integration are inherently problematic, not least because they risk marginalising minorities within religions and the non-religious, leading to their exclusion.
11. While civil society groups based on religious identity and/or belief will naturally emerge within any free society, we believe good policy on civil society engagement is best achieved by citizens and local communities coming together over local issues/issues of shared concern rather than religions affiliation.
12. In diverse and pluralistic societies good religious literacy/knowledge may well assist people to understand one another better but its role should not be overstated. Basic civility and an appreciation of each other's' common humanity will play a much greater role.
13. Similarly, in a pluralistic society good cultural/ethical/political/media literacy may well assist people to understand one another better but its role should not be overstated.

**How do people learn to be religiously literate through school based education, out-of-school activities, the local community, lifelong learning, media and literature, workplace training schemes and other means?**

14. One of the main drivers of good religious literacy is meaningful interaction with people of other faiths and beliefs. Children who learn together (and from each other) learn to live together.
15. This is particularly important if we want children and young people's religious literacy to remain contemporary. Whatever a child's religious views they and their effect on their wider beliefs are likely to change and evolve from generation to generation, particularly through their formative years.
16. The think tank Demos has warned that British schools are "highly segregated" and that "some faith schools effectively exclude other ethnic groups." This segregation is not only to

the detriment of the minority, it crucially undermines cohesion and denies young people of the opportunity to learn about religion and belief from each other from an early age.

17. This is one reason why secularists advocate for integrated and inclusive education rather than schooling organised around religious identities.
18. Education has an important role to play in enabling children to celebrate pluralism and lived multiculturalism – at the same time tackling religious bigotry, intolerance and prejudice. Improved knowledge about religion and belief may well prove useful in fostering mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence, as well as enabling young people to become skilled intercultural navigators.
19. It should however be noted that non-religious worldviews, including secular and philosophical critiques are part of, not separate from, religious literacy.
20. It is for this reason we believe the APPG on RE decision to exclude non-religious worldviews is regressive, short-sighted and thoroughly regrettable. As David Aldridge has argued in the *Journal of Beliefs & Values: Studies in Religion & Education*, "attempts to close out Humanism or other non-religious perspectives as significant contributors to this dialogue are ultimately anti-educational."<sup>1</sup> Efforts to do so point to the use of 'religious literacy' as a device for justifying a more subjective approach the teaching of religion, rather than informing and conveying knowledge in an impartial way.
21. While good religious literacy may counter ill-informed negative views of religion or religious people, attempting to use religious education to foster positive views deprives young people of critical religious literacy skills which they may need to understand and respond to the negative views of religion or religious groups which they will encounter in the real world.

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<sup>1</sup>Journal of Beliefs & Values: Studies in Religion & Education: The case for Humanism  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13617672.2015.1014650>

22. Religious identity/belief differences should not be inappropriately exceptionalised or regarded as being a 'primary' form of identity. Children, as with adults, with have a plethora of different identities.
23. Although there is a degree of conflict between such an aim and the need for good quality religion and belief education within the school curriculum, literacy/understanding of religious and belief differences should not be treated in an exceptional manner differently to other form of identity or difference.
24. Throughout children and young people's formative years, particularly in educational settings, they meet and learn to live with people different to them. 'Social literacy' could refer to understanding of people's different ethnic, cultural backgrounds or nationalities, different sexual orientations and family structures, different mental or physical abilities, different genders, moral outlooks, political beliefs or economic circumstances.
25. By growing up side-by-side children naturally learn about these different identities, without the need for special initiatives, lessons or courses.
26. Schools are also locations for learning and developing religious and social literacy for families. Parents/guardians are invested in the school community. In a religiously diverse school they meet and interact with other parents from different religious backgrounds. When children/young people have good religious literacy they can bridge generational differences in religious and belief ideas and language.
27. Away from school, there are numerous ways in which people learn to be religiously literate. First and foremost they do this through meaningful interaction with people of other faiths and beliefs. Workplaces in which religion or belief is discussed openly, in a respectful and appropriate manner, can have also have positive impact on people's religious literacy.
28. While observing appropriate professional and personal boundaries, staff in most workplaces are free to discuss religion and belief issues in the same way that politics, culture, sport and a variety of other topics are discussed in workplaces every day.

29. Meanwhile, poor religious literacy may leave staff unprepared to encounter critical or unfamiliar discussions of religion or belief issues.
30. In an effort to create a Christian victimhood narrative or increase opportunities for workplace proselytization, some organisations and media outlets have misrepresented rare cases where employee's inappropriate conduct has resulted in disciplinary action, in order to suggest that there is some sort of general discrimination against religious discussions in the workplace.<sup>2</sup>
31. Most companies in the retail and hospitality sectors provide customer service training or guidelines for staff. In many cases this involves training to provide equality of service and respect for people of all backgrounds and with differences. Done well, such training can be a good way to promote religious literacy without exceptionalising it.
32. The media also has a role to play in contributing to people's understanding of religion and the plethora of issues arising from its many manifestations. Looking to the media to teach religious literacy (under any of the three definitions discussed) well is however, an unreasonable expectation.
33. Innovative and informative religious programming is to be encouraged, and at times the media does provide excellent, informative analysis of religion and belief issues. On other times it falls short. Accurate and informed reporting is often sacrificed on the altar of pernicious agendas, sensationalism and the lazy and hasty recycling of press releases. Poor reporting of 'religious issues' may well be a symptom of these factors rather than a sign of religious illiteracy in the newsroom.
34. Sensationalism, scaremongering and misleading reporting can lead to anti-religious bigotry, the promulgation of spurious Christian persecution narratives and the traducement of secularism as a political framework – none of which contributes to improving the nation's religious literacy.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.secularism.org.uk/blog/2015/04/the-christian-fired-for-praying-at-work--heres-the-other-side-of-the-story>

35. Where the media gets it wrong there should be a civil society response – and when media outlets' integrity is found wanting it is often rightly subject to challenge.
36. However, religion isn't the only area where newsrooms are found lacking in expertise. It could be argued that there is a comparable lack of literacy in, for example, science, economics, history and law. There is therefore nothing exceptional about a lack of religion and belief literacy.
37. The degree to which young people supposedly lack religious literacy is often over exaggerated for purposes of sensationalism and moral panic. Such narratives often conflate young people feeling indifferent or hostile towards or just having different views on religion with a lack of religious literacy.
38. Young people's attitudes towards religion will shape future changes in the UK's religious landscape for better or for worse. Those concerned about future generations developing attitudes to religion, in particular the increase in personal religiosity that relegates the role of traditional religious authorities and hierarchies, coupled with an overall decline in religiosity may be prone to moral panic – rarely a good basis for policy making.

**How could the development of Religious Literacy in children be improved within the school context?**

39. There is a growing consensus behind the need to reform religion and belief education to ensure that all children receive impartial education about religious and non-religious worldviews. We are however concerned that the 'urgent need' for improved 'religious literacy' is often overstated by those wishing to elevate the status and role of their religion or belief in wider society. We reject the notion that a deep understanding of another's faith or belief is a necessary pre-condition for a peaceful and tolerant society. Moral and political virtues such as civility, citizenship, tolerance and inclusivity, freedom of and from religion, coupled with an awareness of and respect for human rights, will nurture a more harmonious society – and these values should be promoted throughout state education.

40. A rounded intercultural education will benefit young people by assisting them to navigate issues of religion and belief, but the in-depth study of particular religions should be regarded as a parental or individual responsibility, for those that want it, and not the responsibility of the state.
41. We would favour a move away from the concept of 'religious education'. Instead we would urge the Government to give serious consideration to the development of a new academic programme of study for all pupils that promotes learning about a variety of religious, non-religious and secular philosophies and worldviews. A new National Curriculum subject could provide a more stimulating and objective environment for pupils to study beliefs and values that shape contemporary issues in the world in which they live. Subject content should be determined by educationalists rather than vested interests. Such a subject could promote an appropriate level of religious knowledge along with an understanding of important secular philosophical and ethical perspectives.
42. Opportunities will arise for religious aspects to be explored where relevant in subjects such as English literature, history, and the visual arts. This will enrich students' understanding of both the arts and religious doctrine in a more direct and context-oriented way.
43. Those ideas pertaining to the normative, theological and value-based elements of religious belief can be covered in the context of a reformed subject which looks at these elements in a much wider and more inclusive framework.
44. For many children, their first experience of religious worship is at school. In many cases this worship is imposed by law – and it undertaken as an act of compliance – not as a free exercise of conscience. Compelling children and young people to worship in this way is a wholly inappropriate way of promoting religious literacy and indeed, undermines the human rights of children and young people. Without the religious literacy to understand and place such rituals in context pupils cannot give informed consent to or effectively learn from such activities.

45. We therefore urge the APPG to recommend the removal of the legal obligation on schools to hold acts of (broadly Christian) collective worship.
46. Removal of this legal requirement would in no way prevent schools from providing assemblies that enable pupils to learn about and explore a variety of religious and non-religious worldviews. Inclusive assemblies which foster a sense of community in schools can play a powerful role in developing children's religious literacy and allowing them to celebrate the pluralism within their school and wider community.
47. Educational visits to a variety of places of worship and carefully monitored external visits from people of differing religious perspectives may have a role to play in enhancing religious knowledge and strengthening young people's understanding of religion as a lived experience and of the religious rituals and beliefs that young people may encounter in later life.
48. But perhaps the most significant step that could be taken to aid the development of religious literacy in children within the school context would be to challenge the ghettoization and religious segregation that results from state education so often being organised around religious identities.

**How could the development of Religious Literacy in people of all ages be improved in settings which are not be considered formal education, such as the local community, out-of-school activities, sports teams, media and literature and other means.**

49. Civility needs to be encouraged and prejudice tackled. We all have a stake in ensuring that pluralism and religious diversity in Britain becomes a strength and not a source of tension and sectarian conflict.
50. This can be done by focussing more on what unites us than on what divides. One thing citizens do not share is religion.

51. We are concerned by the implication that the promotion of religious literacy should be advanced in all areas of public life. This seems both disproportionate and counter-productive.
52. One case in point is in the area of sport. The secular nature of sport is part of its appeal and beauty – individuals of all backgrounds coming together with one common language – the language of sport. Seeking to infuse sport and all other areas of public life with religion is likely to do more harm than good.
53. International sports bodies already have a good record of dealing practically with requests for religious accommodations in areas such as scheduling and requests to wear religious jewellery, symbols or clothing – and have made reasonable accommodations. There is no reason to think that different levels of religious literacy would or should lead to different decisions being taken in such cases.
54. In terms of civil society efforts for religious literacy, the legitimate role of the State is highly contestable. Except in protecting the framework of civil and political rights in which civil society lives and through the education system providing children and young with the religious literacy skills necessary to play a full role in civil society, it is not clear what legitimate or effective role the State could play.
55. In today's globalised world, an understanding of others' beliefs is clearly important. Living together successfully will require a certain degree of religion and belief literacy. We believe this can be achieved by the reforms publicly-funded education recommended above.

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