

# **UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND WORLDVIEWS:**

**HOW THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND  
HAS GAINED CONTROL OF  
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The development of religious education syllabuses in the UK is not managed or funded by central government but by regional advisory councils; many of these are poorly funded.
- Key players such as training organisations, national teaching organisations who support the subject and major resource providers, all funded by Christian trusts, have increasingly assumed control over the subject and moulded it to suit their vision.
- Opportunities for major reform have and are being used to reshape the subject in a more Christocentric way by pushing for a narrowing of study that promotes more distinctively Christian ways of studying religion.
- Some local authority SACREs are being used as a vehicle to disseminate syllabuses that are designed to suit the purposes of the Church of England rather than a plural and predominantly non-religious society.
- Over a third of RE syllabuses are written by a commercial resource provider that is funded by a Christian trust working closely with the Church of England to promote their approach to teaching Christianity. This is binding many community schools to what is, in effect, a Church of England syllabus. Over 10% of authorities have adopted a syllabus that largely relies on the Church of England resource *Understanding Christianity* for teaching that faith.
- Despite admissions that *Understanding Christianity* lacks coverage of what many would consider essential aspects of the study of a religion, such as the socio-historical aspects, it is taking up a disproportionate amount of syllabus time, particularly in Church of England schools and in community schools who are legally bound or choose to use it.
- RE Today Services, the publishers of *Understanding Christianity* and over a third of locally agreed syllabuses have restricted public access to what schools are legally bound to teach. This is in spite of NASACRE guidance stating that they are statutory documents agreed by a public body and paid for out of public funding budgets.
- Despite efforts to reform the subject, the vested interests of the power groups who control the subject are seemingly leading it in a regressive direction. Christianity is increasingly being taught on its own terms: the teaching of Christianity rather than teaching about Christianity.
- Relatively little is being done to promote a realistic, critically engaged, impartial and pluralist study of religion and worldviews that is suitable for wider society today, particularly in primary education and at GCSE level.

## ABSTRACT

The lack of an external body to set out a clear disciplinary field for religious education has led to a situation where Christian-funded and oriented organisations have been increasingly able to seize control of the subject. This has led to a surge in resources that emphasise scriptural-based learning and a predominance of theology as a discipline for studying religion, particularly when studying Christianity. This can involve pupils being asked to 'think theologically' and respond to biblical texts and themes with personal reflections on what it would mean to them to take Christianity seriously. It begs the question of whether the subject is falling away from the aim of an impartial, objective and pluralistic study of religion and worldviews encompassing a wide range of disciplinary approaches, as recommended by the Commission on Religious Education (2018).

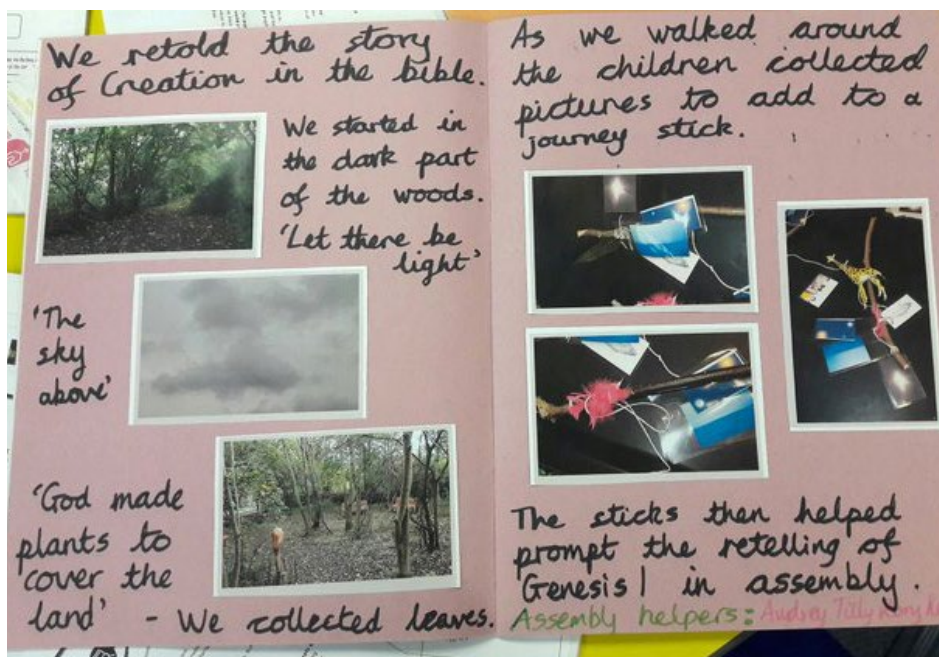
The mechanisms that have been used to integrate such resources into RE curricula in state-funded schools, both those of a religious nature and in the community sector, have been through a system that privileges Christianity with mechanisms to heavily promote them. This serves the purposes of the Church of England and other evangelicals but should be seen as a regressive approach that is overly weighted towards Bible studies. It tends to emphasise the teaching of Christianity on its own terms in the way that a devout Christian might approach the subject. It prioritises doctrines and church teachings over the lived realities of the majority of people who identify as Christian. The wider study of socio-historical aspects of Christianity as a world religion has been neglected, resulting in an unrealistic representation that invites low-level confessionalism, particularly in the primary school phase. Controversial and negative manifestations of Christianity in the wider world have also been glossed over by both making texts central to the study of the religion and selecting only benign extracts from the Bible.

This report investigates how the Church of England, along with other groups with similar vested interests, have used their positions of power and privilege in the subject to promote a distinctly Christian vision of the definition of and how to study 'religion and worldviews'.

## THE STATE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (RE)

As a statutory subject, religious education stands apart from others in the curriculum. There is no centralised national curriculum to specify expected coverage, instead there are one hundred and fifty or so locally agreed syllabuses (LASs) in the UK. They almost all open with lengthy claims about the importance of the subject and the rationale for it, usually claiming a large range of purposes of and benefits from studying the subject. Most syllabuses have variations on similar themes: religious literacy, respect for diversity of belief and spiritual and moral development. These are all contestable aims with varying definitions and Teece (2011) suggests that this is part of the reason for the way the subject is marginalised.

Most syllabuses are unclear about the disciplinary nature of how these purposes and goals are achieved. Different parties offer a plurality of ideas about how to prioritise these purposes and Grimmit (2000) outlines some of the many pedagogical approaches that have and can be employed by anyone undertaking the task of teaching the subject. Over the decades the tide has shifted from one approach to another and that has also brought shifts in the substantive composition of RE curricula, particularly since the 1970s when it was recognised that society was becoming more plural and the subject needed to change to accommodate more diversity.



**Image 1:** Outdoor learning is popular with children, but have they been given an uncritical telling of the biblical creation story? Are year one children capable of understanding what a myth is and are they really aware of the scientific explanation of creation at this age? Is this conflation of RE with collective worship?

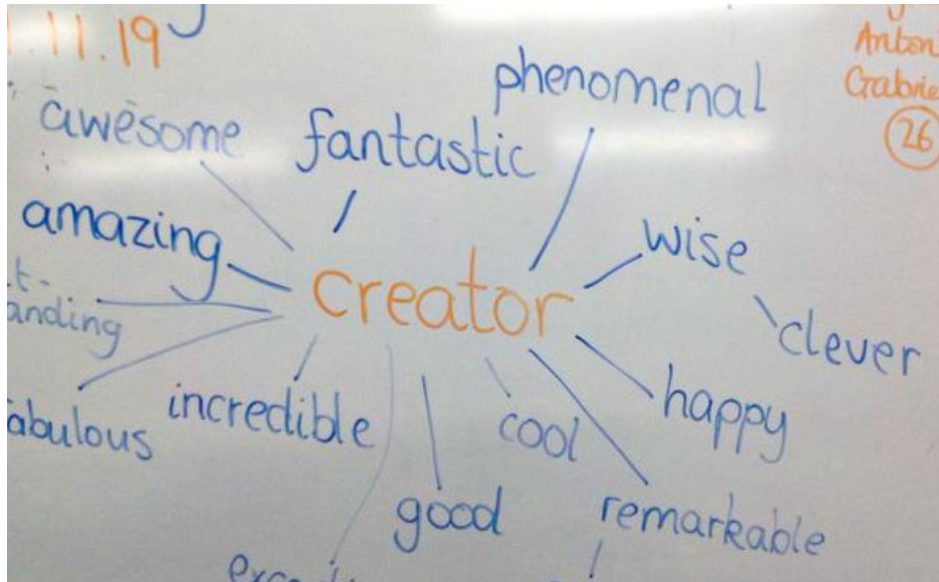
However, certain aspects have remained steadfastly fixed in the frameworks that have been devised – remnants of the confessional approach that was a central part of the subject when the original 1944 settlement was made between church and state. Wintersgill (2017) highlights the issue well:

*Why is the parable of The Good Samaritan so often taught to the exclusion of other teachings of Jesus? Why are the creation stories and other Genesis narratives such as Noah's ark taught to 5–6 year olds, who are not yet able to appreciate the differences between history, fact, fiction, myth etc? Is it because in the 1950s RE, like history, was taught chronologically?*

**It seems that, despite the shifts and changes over the years, very little progress has been made with regards to the primary school phase, particularly in Key Stage 1.**

Successive Ofsted reports culminated with: *Religious Education: Realising the Potential* (2013). It highlighted many areas of concern within the subject, notably: 'Many of the schools visited for the previous report "did not pay sufficient attention to the progressive and systematic investigation of the core beliefs of

Christianity". The development of this understanding remains one of the weakest aspects of achievement.' This was followed by the report commissioned by the Church of England, *Making a Difference? A Review of Religious Education in Church of England Schools* (2014), also overseen by Alan Brine, chief HMI for the subject at the time and later one of the commissioners for the Religious Education Council's Commission on Religious Education (CoRE).



**Image 2:** Year one children brainstorming words for 'creator'. At that age are they able to reason for themselves whether they might be being coerced into a belief?

Weaknesses in the provision of teaching Christianity were also noted in the latter report. The confusion between teaching a rigorous subject and confessionalism, particularly in primary schools, was highlighted: "Frequently, where **the challenge of matching an open enquiry approach to RE with the perceived need to nurture that children's faith was unresolved this was a barrier to success**". But there was also a clear drive for more 'theological thinking' in the church school context. Recommendations included the promotion of the development of pupils' ability to think theologically by providing:

- a clear rationale for the place of theological enquiry in RE as a key to the distinctiveness of RE in church schools
- curriculum models which promote the progressive development of theological thinking within the pupils' study of Christianity
- a repertoire of approaches to learning that promote the development of the skills of theological enquiry alongside other aspects of enquiry in RE
- guidance on how the process of enquiry can be built into the way pupils' progress in RE is defined and assessed

The report did mention that 'For pupils who bring a personal commitment to the religion being studied this could involve them reflecting more deeply on their faith and "doing theology" for themselves', clearly suggesting that 'doing theology' is an insider activity.

The foreword to the report written by Reverend Janina Ainsworth, Chief Education Officer and General Secretary of the National Society, was very telling. She introduced *The Christianity Project* as a project for teaching Christianity in Church of England schools and claimed that it is developed on principles which can be adapted to teaching other faiths. Furthermore:

*Crucially, a return to the systematic teaching of specific faiths in their own terms is the key to improving children's understanding. In line with the Statement of Entitlement that means the skills being developed are the skills of understanding and interpreting each faith in its own terms and not imposing illegitimate overarching constructs on material that develops within widely different cultural and intellectual contexts.*

What is meant by 'a return to the systematic teaching of specific faiths in their own terms'? It is hard to interpret that in any other way than to assume that she means a return to teaching Christianity when the subject was religious instruction with a focus on Bible study and doctrines. The statement also implies that Christianity is one faith and developed from a singular cultural and intellectual context. It seems to be quite a simplistic representation of a religion that was born out of a small Jewish cult in the Middle East and has been interpreted in vastly different ways globally over the two millennia since then. She further claimed that:

*Making a Difference? suggests that the 'art of theological enquiry' is a distinctive contribution from Church of England school community to the wider RE debate. The Christianity Project is structured around the key theological concepts at the heart of the faith. They are approached through the Biblical narrative and illustrated through real lives of Christians today and in the past. The exercise required of pupils is theological enquiry: discovering through activity and question how experience and reflection on the life of Christ shapes and transforms societies.*

***Making a Difference? presents us with an agenda. The Christianity Project will address a large part of it. In three years time I am confident we will be able to remove the question mark and RE will be making a difference to children's lives way beyond Church of England schools.***

The agenda was clear: *The Christianity Project* was always intended to be a model for teaching Christianity through theological enquiry – and not just in their own schools. *The Christianity Project* was later renamed *Understanding Christianity* to make it sound less evangelical. Eventually it was written, edited and published by the highly regarded RE Today team who are leading commercial publishers of materials for religious education. Funding came through a variety of Christian trusts, including the Christian Education Movement, who are the umbrella organisation behind RE Today, although the Church of England themselves did not support this part of the enterprise financially.

2015 saw a flurry of papers calling for the need for change in the subject. Clark and Woodhead's *A New Settlement: Religion and Belief in Schools* (2015) highlighted the need to cover 'life stances' and non-religious philosophies on equal footing with religions. They outlined how the 'dual system' of 'schools with a religious character' and community schools came about and called for reform in both RE and collective worship. The RE for Real report by Dinham and Shaw (2015) highlights the need for a broad and pragmatic religious literacy in order to develop pupils' life skills in a diverse society: 'The content [of RE] should reflect the real religious landscape, as revealed by cutting edge theory and data in the study of contemporary religion and belief.' The third report, Woolf (2015) claimed that: 'A religiously literate society... can only be achieved by a root and branch reform of how we learn and think about religion and belief at school, at university, at work and in everyday life.'

The three papers were influential in the Religious Education Council setting up the Commission on Religious Education, an independent body of educationalists from diverse backgrounds who, after two years of investigation and deliberation, published their report *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward* (2018). Apart from a name change to reflect the need for the study of religion as a category and worldviews as diverse institutional and individual ways of making sense of the world, it proposed a statement of entitlement which should be a minimum for pupils in all schools.

This was generally well received by the majority of people in the RE community with the vocal exceptions of the Catholic Education Service and the Jewish Board of Deputies who were insistent that they would retain the authority to teach the subject in their own ways. It led to what Bloom in the Times Educational Supplement (2018) called 'the battle for the soul of RE' which simplistically pitched theological against sociological approaches.



The interim report (2017) was responded to by Derek Holloway for the Church of England Education Office (2017). His concern was that the report seemed to be aimed at the 'more academic', secondary phase of school. The Church of England had four thousand, five hundred primary and first schools and their concern was particularly with voluntary controlled schools (the ones that would normally be following a LAS rather than a more church-centred version of a syllabus as prescribed by the local diocese).

Whilst welcoming a statement of entitlement, something they had already established for their schools, he found it '...less an entitlement statement; more a set of organising principles for the drafting of a syllabus.' He found the statement to be too lengthy and complex: 'This does make it flexible and open but by doing so it becomes impractical as an entitlement statement.' In many ways he might have been correct as the entitlement was designed to accommodate competing interpretations of the subject as a curriculum.

Holloway drew upon the work of four diocesan advisers: Chipperton, Georgiou, Seymour and Wright. Their work *'Rethinking RE: A Conversation about Religious and Theological Literacy'* (2015, 16) was a persuasive argument to put theology as one of the legs of a multidisciplinary approach, the other two legs being social studies and philosophy. Their paper drew from *Making a Difference?* (2014) which said that:

*A balanced RE curriculum would place the goal of 'thinking theologically' within the context of a repertoire of other approaches towards the promotion of religious literacy drawn from, for example, social sciences and philosophy.*

It fails to acknowledge, but very closely paraphrases Armentrout and Boak Slocum's Episcopal Dictionary of the Church on its sources of authority: 'The threefold sources of authority in Anglicanism are scripture, tradition, and reason.' and 'The Anglican balance of authority has been characterised as a 'three-legged stool' which falls if any one of the legs is not upright.' If a parallel is drawn between scripture as the theological, tradition the social sciences and reason the philosophical leg then their vision for the subject can be seen as fitting closely with an Anglican worldview. It also fits very much with a CofE vision for the subject in that theology sits in pride of place at the top of the triangle and continues the tradition of RE being a very Christocentric subject. Winter (2019) critiques a number of ways in which the disciplinary nature of the subject has been framed and notes their sources:

*Here Bernstein offers the tool of reflecting on who is recontextualising the knowledge, in this instance the Church of England Education Office, allowing the conscious teacher to question whether this recontextualization and potential reproduction in the classroom is the appropriate format in which to introduce students to disciplinary produced knowledge: applicable also to the 'Understanding Christianity' resources released by the Church of England.*

The suggestion by Chipperton et al of theology being widely interpreted as being about foundational beliefs allows it to conveniently sit with any worldview, even Buddhist or Humanist, despite them likely having what they might consider to have a more philosophical background than theological and it's hard to imagine that a Humanist would attempt to understand their worldview through the discipline of theology.

The proposal for a multidisciplinary basis for the subject was generally well received, although some did argue whether there were more disciplines that should be used as foci for a balanced approach to the subject.

**The problem lies in the muddying between the disciplinary nature of theology and the substantive area of theology.** The only mainstream voice openly articulating clear dissent at the time was Brine, in two blogs. In *Thinking Theologically in RE Part 1* (2016) he argued for a clearer understanding of what was meant by 'thinking theologically'; in the *Making A Difference?* report he wrote:

*The first recommendation of the report suggested that schools needed to provide 'a more coherent, progressive and challenging approach to the teaching of Christianity within the context of the wider exploration of the diversity of religion and belief in the modern world'. The danger was that attention would be paid to the first half of this recommendation without reference to the second half.*

*Studying theology is something that goes on inside a religious community. Students of RE should be interested in this process as observers but cannot directly participate in it.*

*To take an example: the resurrection. It is interesting to find out how Christians talk about the*



resurrection. It raises a number of questions: How did the idea originate? How do Christians link the idea of the resurrection to other beliefs? Do all Christians understand the idea in the same way? How has the idea been re-interpreted by different Christians? What debates go on inside Christianity about it? But is there any point asking pupils to draw conclusions about the truth or meaning of the resurrection for themselves? Only the insider can do that.

**Crucially what we are studying is the behaviour of Christians – we are not actually engaging in theology itself.**

Stephen Prothero in his tantalisingly titled 2007 book *Religious Literacy – What Every American Needs to Know and Doesn't* makes this observation:

**'theology and religious studies... are two very different things – as different as art and art history. While theologians do religion, religious studies scholars study religion.'**

It would be a major concern if attempts were made to distort learning in RE by structuring the whole study of Christianity around a series of theological concepts and processes. That is in danger of privileging 'theological' faith above the lived reality of religious life. This of course might be the goal of the religious establishment who want RE to 'teach' the faith the way they want it taught. BUT it runs the risk of distorting the core purpose of RE – to engage pupils in an **impartial, objective study of religion and belief**.

In *Thinking Theologically Part 2* (2016) he raised a number of points:

1. In the words of an RE colleague: **'it is... important that students learn that theology is a rather rarefied activity within a religion.** In other words, it is not usually the concern of ordinary believers. So teaching theological concepts can give a misleading reflection of how the majority of believers practice (sic) their religion.' For many, possibly most, being religious has little to do with what they believe – it is much more to do with their practice, values, and sense of identity and belonging. These are shaped to some extent by the formal beliefs but many will have little sense of what that might mean.
2. **It is important that students learn that religions and worldviews involve a tension between the orthodoxy of the establishment and the heterodoxy and syncretism of the people.** Many people's 'theology' is very heterodox: 'at variance with an official or orthodox position' and syncretistic: 'a union or attempted fusion of different religions, cultures, or philosophies'.
3. **It is important that students learn that the term theology only really applies to theistic Abrahamic religions.** To assume it has universal application to non-theistic, dharmic and non-religious worldviews is unhelpful. Humanists may have a view about theism as part of their 'core foundational beliefs' but they do not have a theology.
4. And, much more problematically, we need to remember that **there are those who question the validity of theology as an academic process.** As the American science fiction writer Robert A Heinlein said in his 1984 book *Job: A Comedy of Justice*, "theology ... is searching in a dark cellar at midnight for a black cat that isn't there." This position is divisive and uncomfortable for RE and probably best parked for the duration!

So – with these important caveats – I think there is widespread agreement that understanding the nature, content, function, history, impact of theology within theistic religions is one important part of any RE provision. It is also clear that a range of disciplines is necessary to study that theology – history, social science, phenomenology, philosophy, textual study etc.

The challenge is to answer the question: **Should and can RE incorporate theology as one of its core disciplines as well as part of the core content of its curriculum?** When in RE you study the theology of Christianity, are you 'doing' theology or are you 'doing' something else such as phenomenology or philosophy?

Nevertheless, *Rethinking RE: A Conversation about Religious and Theological Literacy* (2016), along with the publication of the final report of the Commission on RE, influenced a redrafting of the Church of England's *Statement of Entitlement* (2019). Under the heading 'The Entitlement: provision, profile and priority' was the statement that:

*In a Church school the pupils and their families can expect an RE curriculum that enables pupils to acquire a rich, deep knowledge and understanding of Christian belief and practice, this should include the ways in which it is unique and diverse. Parents can expect the use of high-quality resources, for example, the Understanding Christianity resource. Pupils can expect that teaching and learning in Church schools will use an approach that engages with biblical text and theological ideas.*

It further stated that “All pupils are entitled to religious education that is delivered in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner. Pupils are entitled to a balanced RE curriculum which enquires into religions and worldviews through theology, philosophy and the human and the social sciences”. The aims and objectives for RE started with: “To know about and understand Christianity as a diverse global living faith through the exploration of core beliefs using an approach that critically engages with biblical text”. The statement also clarified that one function of the Diocesan Board of Education was to:

*... promote, or assist in the promotion of, religious education in schools in the diocese. This should be fulfilled by monitoring the quality of religious education in church schools through taking note of SIAMS inspection reports and by securing high quality training for all schools throughout the diocese. This will help ensure that the provision for religious education is effective and is able to fulfil the expectations of this statement.*

The [Exeter diocesan website](#) (accessed June 2020) further stated that:

***The new Understanding Christianity resource for Religious Education is going to be the benchmark against which schools will be judged in the next SIAMS framework. It is therefore, our expectation that all Diocesan schools should be providing quality Religious Education that is at least as good as the expectations set out in Understanding Christianity from next year.***

Since then the [Exeter diocesan website](#) (accessed September 2020) has been updated to reflect the fact that Devon SACRE adopted the RE Today syllabus which includes Understanding Christianity. It clarifies a focus of the SIAMS inspection as being:

*How well does RE help pupils to know about and understand Christianity as a living world faith through the exploration of core theological concepts, using an approach that critically engages with text?*

The recommendation from the Diocese of Exeter is that **all** schools should be teaching from the agreed syllabus, including VA schools. **This makes it clear that even community schools will be teaching from a syllabus written to accommodate the expectations of a voluntary aided church school.**

Genders (2018) responded to the final CoRE *Statement of Entitlement* on behalf of the Church of England:

*We fully support the policy of developing a Statement of Entitlement to RE and are pleased to see the Commission endorsing an approach which we already use in Church of England schools. However, the Commission’s proposed Statement of Entitlement requires further work if it is to ensure that children and young people develop religious and theological literacy as part of their knowledge and understanding. We look forward to playing our part in working with the education community to achieve this and building an irresistible consensus of agreement about the subject.*

The response is ended with notes for editors including a link to *Understanding Christianity*.

The clear message was that they want theological literacy to be one of the underpinning principles for religious education, whatever it was to be called, and for that resource to be used to underpin it. **It was also clear that there was an intention to work with the rest of the RE community to build ‘an irresistible consensus’ on RE that reflected the Church of England’s vision for the subject.**

# IMPACT OF THE COMMISSION ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION'S REPORT

The Commission came up with eleven recommendations. Some of them were acted on immediately and others are part of a long-term plan to revise the subject. The Commission have claimed that there was never an expectation that the whole report would or even could be acted on by the RE community immediately. Much of it rests on the Department for Education; whether they would be willing to make legal changes to fit with the recommendations is another matter entirely.

1. To change the name to religion and worldviews has met some resistance from some and still has no legal status, however, Culham St Gabriel's, a charity with its objects 'in accordance with the doctrines and principles of the Church of England' seem to have embraced it. The name, as many have pointed out, is not as important as the reform and might, in some circumstances, even be used as a vehicle to gain traction for a different interpretation of the commission's vision.
2. The National Entitlement becoming statutory for state funded schools looks to be a long way off. There might be localised efforts to accommodate it. The RE Council is still conducting research into defining exactly what is meant by a 'worldview'.
3. Non-statutory programmes of study that should be ratified by the DfE. The RE Council tendered for the opportunity and in June 2020 they announced that it had been won by a bid from RE Today Services.<sup>1</sup> (coincidentally, Mike McMaster, who had been business manager at RE Today for five years, recently took over the reigns as Interim CEO of the RE Council).
4. The requirement for LASs to be removed would only ever be a long-term goal.
5. Reviewing the GCSE and 'A' Level specifications in the light of the National Entitlement. Again, this is unlikely to change greatly unless the rest of the subject is reformed.
6. Covered the need for greater teacher training. This was an aspect that NATRE, the REC and RE Today lobbied for successfully. This led to Culham St Gabriel's Teach: RE courses – funded by the DfE, endorsed and certified by NATRE but owned and managed by Culham St Gabriel's. It provides two hundred hours of specialist training to equip teachers for the current GCSE exam. The exam covers just two religions: Christianity and one other. They offer a range of other courses, some of which have mention of the *CoRE Statement of Entitlement*.<sup>2</sup>
7. Government funding for CPD for teachers to deliver the new non-statutory schemes of work: this will be some years off.
8. Establishing Local Advisory Networks for Religion and Worldviews to replace SACREs.
9. Ofsted or Section 48 inspectors must report on whether schools are meeting the National Entitlement. NATRE and the REC lobbied successfully for this as well. Ofsted have eventually started reporting on the provision of RE in community schools and academies. They have reported on some CE voluntary aided schools, although they have largely left scrutiny of RE in church schools to the internal inspection systems of Section 48 of the Education Act 2005 for schools with a religious character. In CE schools this is called Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS). In effect, they police and judge themselves on whether the schools are adhering to their own vision for education. For those teaching in voluntary aided schools, it also means a grading for their performance in RE. Clearly, they are understandably expecting their schools to deliver RE in the way that fits with their *Vision for Education* (2016) and the *Statement of Entitlement* (2019).
10. The DfE should amend the school performance measures so that religion and worldviews is covered by the EBacc. The Russell Group should include 'A' level Religious Studies as a facilitating subject.

1 <https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/news/news06/>

2 <https://www.teachre.co.uk/teach-re-course/religion-and-worldviews-ske/>

11. The DfE should review the right to withdraw. The Commission made no judgement on this as it is a contentious issue. Many within the subject would like to see it removed, but others recognise that it has human rights implications.

So far only a few of the recommendations have seen much progress. There has been a good deal of discussion and various papers around what is a worldview, but major reform was always going to be a long game. Where some parties are adopting the name, however, they seem to be making the definitions stretch to accommodate their vision for the subject. Part of this has been the appropriation of the term worldview in a theological context.

## THE RISING PRESENCE OF THEOLOGY IN RE

Trevor Cooling, Chair of the Religious Education Council and Professor of Christian Education at Canterbury Christ Church University, has a long history of driving for the greater prominence of theology as a discipline in religious education in schools. He headed up the Stapleford Project and pushed for a style of teaching that was based on theological concepts (the 'Concept Cracking' approach).

The Stapleford Project itself was 'set up in 1986 by the Association of Christian Teachers in England with the purpose of producing a range of materials to support teaching about Christianity in school religious education.' As such, it was not concerned with mainstream RE but the conveying of theological concepts that they felt underpinned Christianity.

Cooling further went on to produce the paper *Doing God in Education* (2010) that argued for the legitimacy of a 'Christian way of teaching RE'. This was developed further, and he was an instrumental part of the team that set up the 'What If Learning' website to promote a specifically Christian approach to framing teaching across the curriculum. As part of a review of the approach, he claimed that there was '... an urgent need for the development and dissemination of a Christian theological understanding of teaching and learning which overcomes both the sense of weirdness and the sense of not being Christian enough identified by our teachers when trying to integrate Christian ethos with learning across the curriculum subjects.'

The review was supported financially by The Jerusalem Trust, Culham St Gabriel's Trust, Hinchley Charitable Trust and the Hockerill Educational Foundation, all of them Christian charitable bodies.

Terence Copley, as the director of the Biblos Project based at the University of Exeter, was another academic pushing for greater emphasis on the study of texts and their interpretations. In *Young People, Biblical Narrative and "Theologizing": A UK Perspective* (2005) he suggested that:

*In the context of biblical narrative in public school RE, to enable students to "theologize" is to make them hermeneutically literate. It is to enable them to appreciate a passage in its context and in its originating milieu culturally. It is to enable them to see those features in their own culture that may distort or censor narrative.*

Whether this is a universally agreed conceptualisation of what theologising is or even whether it should be an aim as part of RE in schools is debatable; it could well describe an aspect of the English or history curriculum. The project was funded by The Bible Society, a Christian charity established to 'encourage the wider circulation and use of the Bible'.

Freathy (also involved in the Biblos Project) and David (2018) suggested that, despite protestations from some at their incompatibility, theology and religious studies seem to be increasingly occupying more of the same ground. In doing so they made a case for the inclusion of theology in religious studies in non-faith settings. They note the irony that the 2014 Church of England report *Making a Difference* was penned by Alan Brine, then HMI for RE, and claim that he was calling for increased theological literacy. They did not mention his later clarification (2016):

*When the 'Making a Difference' report was written it was clear that the concept of theological enquiry was not well-defined. It was a portmanteau term detached from any technical use of the notion of 'theology'. We were searching to define a dimension of RE that was missing in too many classrooms and that would play well in the church school context of the report.*

He was writing for an audience and identified a weakness that needed developing in the subject; his intention was not to argue for pupils to theologise (to do theology), in fact, quite the opposite which he clarified in a series of blogs over the next few years. His main argument was that theology has been given a dominance that is not always reflected in the concerns of the average churchgoing Christian in Britain today. Nevertheless, the Ofsted report that Brine wrote in 2013 and *Making a Difference* produced for the Church of England in 2014 were both widely cited as evidence for an increase in the status of theology in RE.



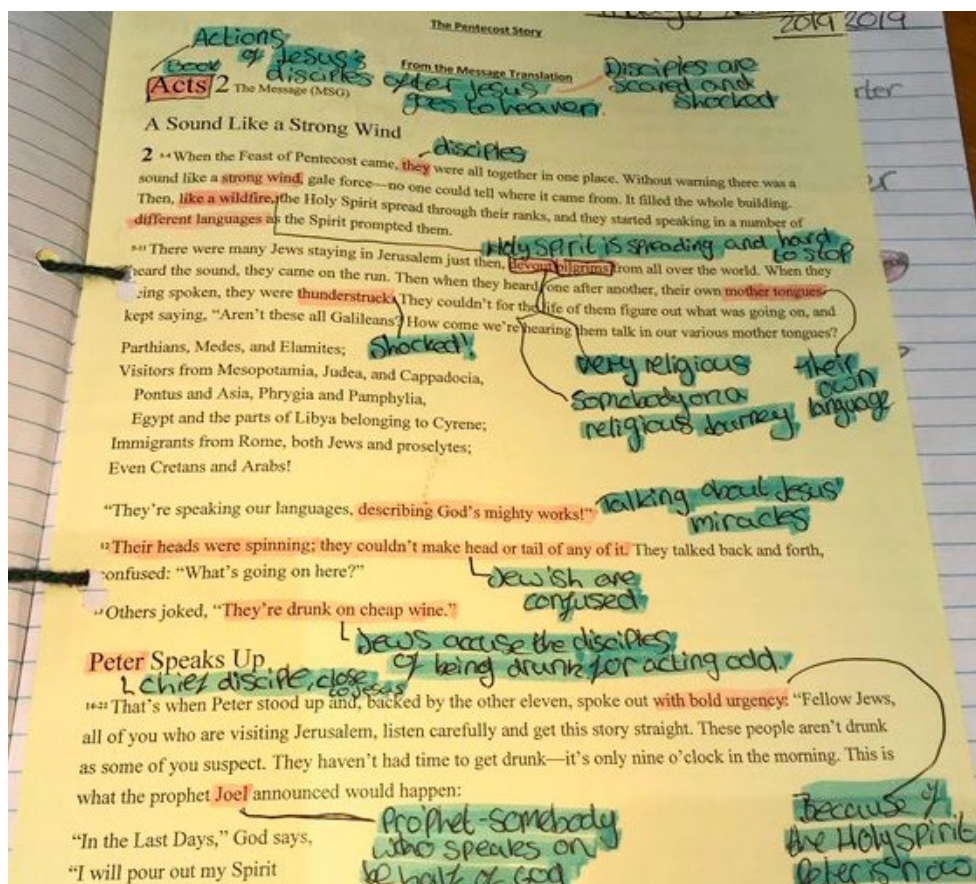
More recently, Professor Bob Bowie of Canterbury Christ Church University and Director of the National Institute for Christian Education Research (NICER) has published work called *Hermeneutical RE: Texts and Teachers*. It "explores the connection between sacred text scholarship, hermeneutics and worldview education, in the context of the English RE debate". It was funded by Culham St Gabriel's and supported by the Bible Society. Two documents to support teachers were launched: *Opening the Door to Hermeneutical RE* (2020) and *The Practice Guide* (2020). It is based on the work of Anthony C. Thiselton, the English Anglican priest, theologian, and leading Scripture scholar, who "observed that when his students studied hermeneutics their understanding and approach to sacred texts changed." It asks the question: "Should schools help students become good interpreters of religion, worldviews, and sacred texts? Should they help students explore what it means to be a sacred text scholar?" Quite clearly the author expects the answer to be yes. But is it really the task of a school pupil to be the interpreter of a sacred text or should they be studying how Christians interpret their sacred text? Does this shift in emphasis put the resource at risk of being accused of a form of confessionalism?

The resource explains: "One Christian idea is that revelation 'speaks' today, and is not simply "archaeological" matter. Consequently, new insights are possible, and a text can speak anew".

### Questions to encourage readership

- What connections can you make between these words and your own life? What insights might you bring from your own situation, perspective?
- Can you identify your own tendency to read a text in certain ways, even biased ways that suit your own interests or situation?
- How does your reading of this text relate to the common readings made by faith communities?

Clearly religious people interpret their texts in different ways, and it is not unreasonable to expect pupils to recognise that fact. But doing the interpretation for themselves, looking for connections between the texts and their own lives and becoming a sacred texts scholar seems far removed from what was recommended by the Commission on RE: "The different ways that people interpret and respond to texts and other sources of authority".



**Image 3:** Year seven pupils analysing biblical texts. Are they also taught to question the veracity of the story?



*Theologies of Reading* by Jackson Ravenscroft and Wright (2020), available from the RE: Online website which is managed by Culham St Gabriel's, is another resource dedicated to engaging pupils with the task of reading sacred texts. Three different ways of approaching reading and meaning making are explained within religious communities. The resource is backed with presentations and suggestions about how these can be implemented with the Abrahamic faiths. One of the approaches is called *Lectio Divina*:

*In this practice (Lectio Divina is Latin for 'divine reading'), reading is established as a dialogical act, a living process; the text is not an inert document, but inhabits the voice of the reader.*

*Lectio divina is a traditional Christian monastic practice. It carries a sense of the importance of slowness, paying attention, and reading aloud to oneself. It invites the reader to search for hidden and higher 'spiritual' meaning in the text.*

*Those practising it will read, meditate, pray, and contemplate, all as part of the same practice. Yet as a historically monastic practice, this kind of reading is done in community with others.*

What *Lectio Divina* explains more about the practice: 'It is a way of praying the scriptures that leads us deeper into God's word'. In setting out how to enter into *Lectio Divina* it says 'Make sure you are sitting comfortably. Breathe slowly and deeply. Ask God to speak to you through the passage that you are about to read'. The document outlines feedback on the method from the Church of England's House of Bishops: 'My own view would be that *Lectio Divina* is a useful devotional approach to Scripture and it is good to use this method in some circumstances... However, I do think *Lectio Divina* has its limitations and would be unhappy if we continued to use this as the main way of engaging with Scripture in the College of Bishops, without exploring other approaches'.

Asking pupils to infer their own meaning from sacred texts could be classed as a literacy skill, but asking them to dwell on individual words and suggest their own meanings for the text might not be a productive exercise when they could be studying how religious individuals and organisations make texts fit with their purposes. This requires an understanding of the historical and societal influences that shape their interpretations. In short, theology does not drive textual interpretation or vice versa but sociological pressures bring about impetus for believers to reassess and redefine meanings and bring emphasis to differing parts of their texts. Hence liberation theology, feminist theology, queer theology, black theology, etc. all rely on theologising to use texts to justify their understanding of key Christian beliefs. The popular Christian notion of 'stewardship' is a case in point. There is no translation of the Bible that mentions that word in Genesis. 'Dominion' is the term used to describe mankind's relationship with nature: it is clearly a very different notion. **It is impossible to understand the development of the breadth of Christianity or its changing teachings and varying denominational manifestations outside socio-historical contexts.**

## THE PROMOTION OF THEOLOGY AS 'RIGOROUS RE'

The National Curriculum Review of 2011 called for the study of 'fewer things in greater depth'. This was to ensure that learning was embedded, and that progress was built upon solid foundations. This was enthusiastically seized by some parties as an invitation to actually exclude the study of some religions and drive for 'greater rigour' in the few that were left. This was exemplified in a panel interview on the future of RE featuring members of the NATRE Executive and one of their 'steering group' who claimed that we had to 'worry less about not covering some religions'. You can see the interview in full at *RE for Real: What sort of RE is appropriate in Britain today?*<sup>3</sup>

Research led to the possible source of this assertion being the eminent theologian Professor David Ford, the main theological consultant for *Understanding Christianity*. A series of blogs and discussions on social media followed calling for 'greater rigour' in the subject and for many, especially those with a background in theology at university, that was the approach that was eagerly promoted.

This notion of theology being vital in providing 'greater depth' was reiterated by Chipperton et al (2016) in their discussion paper *Rethinking RE – A Midrash*. They suggested that "working below the soil requires tools that can dig deep, whereas different kinds of tools are required to tend the branches and leaves" but Brine (2016) responded to the paper in two blogs: in *Thinking Theologically in RE Part 1* he asked the vital question: "Is theology part of the subject matter rather than the pedagogy of RE?". In *Thinking Theologically Part 2* he questioned the notion of whether 'theological enquiry' was:

- *a particular pedagogical approach which 'in the context of Church of England schools... enables pupils to hold a theologically informed and thoughtful conversation about at least Christianity as a living and varied faith'*

OR

- *whether it is part of the general study of religion and belief – that aspect of study which focuses on what Smart would call the doctrinal dimension of religion. Is theology part of the subject matter rather than the pedagogy of RE?*

*The danger is privileging theological enquiry as **the way** into deepening learning in RE. There is an unresolved hint that this would be a way of affirming the distinctiveness of RE in Church schools. At the heart of this lies a hidden attempt to market a particular understanding of Christianity which undermines a core ideal of religious literacy, i.e. the impartial study of religion and belief. There are a number of different ways to deepen learning in RE. These need to be kept in tension and no one discipline should dominate. A diversity of disciplines (history, philosophy, sociology, phenomenology etc.) can each bring a depth (the roots) to the study of religion and belief. **I have serious doubts whether 'theology' is one of those disciplines.***

In *Curb Your Enthusiasm: In Search of Theological Illiteracy* (2016) Brine railed against the over-emphasis of theology in the curriculum, particularly the theological content of the GCSE course:

*Few religious folk have much depth of theological literacy. As one of my colleagues often reminds me, there is a danger that we are starting to expect Year 6 pupils to develop a subtler level of theological understanding than most religious believers... 'Belonging not Believing' characterises the religious life of many; much to the chagrin of some. But many are happy to operate with a light touch approach to theological concepts. (See the brilliant analysis in Linda Woodhead and Andrew Brown's new book: *That Was The Church That Was*.)*

**What is the role of RE in relation to theological illiteracy?**

*He cited calls for help on a well-known Facebook group for RE teachers:*

*This week it was the issue of the Genesis concept of 'ruach'. How do we teach it? Is it the same as the Holy Spirit? Is it a dimension of the Trinity? How can I help students understand? Help! Many came to the rescue...*

3 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7ezz5ft1uY&feature=youtu.be&t=6m30s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7ezz5ft1uY&feature=youtu.be&t=6m30s)

*Some are arguing that we need to improve our subject knowledge. Guilt abides. But one thing we know as good students of religion is that few Christians would have this subject knowledge. So what is it we don't know? If theology does not play a meaningful part in the religious life of most people, why are we placing so much emphasis on it as part of the impartial study of religions?*

*Aren't we massively overplaying the role of doctrine, belief and theology in the lives of most religious people? And if so, who is driving that agenda?*

This shifting direction in the subject had been picked up earlier by Brine when he outlined the nature of the two schools of thought that exist within the RE community in his blog *Going Deeper – but in which direction?* (2016). 'Is RE primarily about reinforcing a heritage/orthodoxy model of religion? OR Should RE primarily reflect the complex lived reality of religion and belief?' The Commission on Religion and Belief (The Woolf Report, 2015) clearly favoured the latter model and suggested that:

*... the content of many syllabuses is inadequate. They fail to reflect the reality of religion and belief, having a rather sanitised or idealised form of religion as their content. They tend to portray religions only in a good light, focusing on the role of religions in encouraging peace, harmony, and caring for the poor and the environment; and they tend to omit the role of religions in reinforcing stereotypes and prejudice around issues such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity and race, and the attempts to use religion as a justification for terrorism.*

Smith et al (2018) also highlighted the way that RE teachers tend to essentialise religions as benign, but they are largely reiterating what has been fed to them through resources produced and disseminated by parties with vested interests in portraying a positive image of their own faith. Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) and the agreed syllabus system have perpetrated the presentation of simplified, benign aspects of religions. Resource producers have also tended to offer a very rose-tinted presentation of religions and non-religious faiths as being of great benefit to humanity, particularly so in the primary education phase. Comparatively few teachers have the subject knowledge or motivation, particularly in the primary sector where there are even fewer subject specialists, to paint a more realistic and balanced image of what is being studied. It is making it very difficult to enable the functional religious literacy that is needed to equip young people for life in a diverse, pluralistic society as advocated by Dinham and Shaw (2015) and the Commission on Religion and Belief (the Woolf Report, 2015). There is also a real confusion of purpose for the subject as identified by many, but notably by Conroy et al (2018).

Brine and Chater in Chater (ed) *Reforming RE: Power and Knowledge in a Worldviews Curriculum* (2020) outline the situation well in a powerful opening chapter that outlines the 'twin narratives' of RE. They outline the structural changes in the subject over the years.

*Organisationally, RE is in the hands of producer communities, some of which are led and funded by faith-based organisations... While non-faith RE continues to suffer from weak support mechanisms, the danger has been that it is forced to look to the resources of the faith school sector and other producer organisations as sources of help and influence.*

They note that the neglect of the subject by central government since 2010 has led to a situation where the faith sector have been able to increasingly occupy centre stage and mould the subject to suit their aims.

*Much of the investment for resource development and CDP now focuses on the particular priorities of faith schools. We have seen an increasing dependency on faith-based trusts in the funding of RE initiatives. There is an increasing reliance on faith sector personnel and resource providers in the development of locally agreed syllabuses. There is a growing inequity of access to, and influence on, policy-makers between the faith and non-faith sectors.*

They note the way that “the 2015–16 reforms to the GCSE Religious Studies specifications incorporated a narrower academic focus on theology, rather than an exploration of the lived reality and diversity of religion and belief in the modern world”. Furthermore, they raise the issue of how the Church of England’s 2016 *Vision for Education* pushed for a more distinctively Christian approach to education: “Arguably, these initiatives reflect a greater determination on the part of the Church of England to use their schools to promote the faith.”

*These shifts in focus have been accompanied by the publication of Understanding Christianity, a Church of England Education Office project, promoting a strongly theological approach to the teaching of Christianity in RE and placing Christian theological concepts at the heart of the way large swathes of the curriculum are designed. While the publication was initially intended for CofE schools, it has subsequently been promoted in the non-faith sector with a consequent impact on the wider teaching of RE. Opinions differ on Understanding Christianity: for some it dramatically raises standards of theological literacy, while for others it is alarmingly regressive and narrowly scriptural. However, the main point is that it has absorbed a significant proportion of money, time and energy, leaving other RE content relatively deprived of all three.*

*Overall, this ecological shift has seen the faith sector, which represents only a third of maintained schools, emerge as the more organised and powerful voice in RE. The gravitational pull of the faith sector has exerted itself on the already weak credibility and independence of the subject as a whole. All these changes are reflected in the recent regressive shifts in the way RE overall is conceptualised and supported. Notably, the theological and scriptural emphasis does not sit well with the approach to the teaching of R&W advocated by the Commission on RE. Sooner or later, and before it is too late, RE must redress the balance and change the influence of the faith sector.*

Their points highlight how the Church of England’s *Vision for Education* and *Statement of Entitlement* is impacting beyond their own schools into the community sector.

## WHAT CONSTITUTES A C of E VISION FOR THE SUBJECT?

For those who lead and teach in a Church of England school, the message from Church House is clear that the 'Christian ethos' should permeate the whole curriculum. This is monitored and judged by the Section 48 framework: Statutory Inspections of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS), against their *Vision for Education* (2016). This states that: 'The vision is deeply Christian, with the promise by Jesus of "life in all its fullness" at its heart.' The phrase 'life in all its fullness' is a reference to John 10:10 which most theologians understand as 'having a life-enhancing encounter with the Christian faith and the person of Jesus Christ', or in layman's terms, becoming a Christian.

The wording of the Church of England *Statement of Entitlement* for RE (2019) states that: 'At the heart of RE in church schools is the teaching **of** Christianity and pupils also learn **about** other faiths and world views' (my emphasis in bold). But it is the teaching of Christianity and not the teaching *about* Christianity that they are specifically expecting. It is a corruption of the subject that edges towards catechesis and tends to lend itself to the 'othering' of religions and beliefs that are not Christian. This is given a grading in SIAMS inspections in VA schools and the expectation for teaching Christianity is at least two thirds of the RE curriculum and, in some dioceses, up to 80% of curriculum time.

It further recommends that:

*In a Church school the pupils and their families can expect an RE curriculum that enables pupils to acquire a rich, deep knowledge and understanding of Christian belief and practice, this should include the ways in which it is unique and diverse. Parents can expect the use of high-quality re-sources, for example, the Understanding Christianity resource. Pupils can expect that teaching and learning in Church schools will use an approach that engages with biblical text and theological ideas.*

This becomes of greater concern in some schools which are overtly evangelical and echo the statement made in the Diocesan Boards of Education for Blackburn, Carlisle, Chester, Liverpool and Manchester's guidance in their *Framework for Religious Education in Church of England Secondary Schools* (accessed June 2020):

### **Religious Education in Church of England Schools**

*As 'schools of faith' Church of England schools recognise the common search of all humanity for ultimate truth and relationship with the Divine. A vision of education inspired by the life and example of Jesus Christ is a catalyst for a process of formation for the whole person and the whole human family. RE is key to fulfilling the purpose of a church school as described by the late Lord Runcie when he was Archbishop of Canterbury: 'to nourish those of the faith; encourage those of other faiths and challenge those who have no faith.' Inspired by this statement, the North West of England dioceses set out that:*

***"The principal aim of Religious Education is to affirm and nourish, encourage and challenge all students on their spiritual journey."***

*In an Anglican school, the educational process is rooted in the Christian foundation of the school community. Therefore all teaching, learning and planning takes place within the ethos of the school community. Religious Education lies at the very heart of the curriculum, reflecting and conveying the distinctively Christian character of the school community as reflected in the Anglican tradition. RE has a key role in helping students to:*

- *engage with the living faith of the school;*
- *understand how religious faith can provide a vision to sustain and develop their spiritual and personal life;*
- *develop a sense of themselves as significant, unique and precious;*
- *become active citizens, understanding and serving their neighbour;*
- *find reason for hope in a troubled world.*

### **Religious Education in Church Schools**

*In order for these aims to be fulfilled students are entitled to the highest standards of teaching and learning in Religious Education to enable them to:*

- *think theologically and explore ultimate questions;*
- *reflect critically on the truth claims of Christian belief;*
- *face the challenge of Jesus' teaching in a pluralist and post-modern society;*
- *develop the skills to analyse, interpret and apply the Bible text;*
- *recognise that faith is commitment to a particular way of understanding and responding to God and the world;*
- *analyse and explain the varied nature and traditions of the Christian community;*
- *make a well-informed response to Christianity;*
- *respect those of all faiths in their search for God;*
- *reflect critically on areas of shared belief and practice between different faiths;*
- *enrich and expand their understanding of truth;*
- *reflect critically and express their views on the human quest.*

Clearly it is very difficult to reconcile many of those aims, particularly "challenging those of no faith"; engaging "with the living faith of the school" and understanding "how religious faith can provide a vision to sustain and develop their spiritual and personal life" with the notion of an impartial, critical and pluralistic study of religion and worldviews.



## THE DEVELOPMENT OF UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Reports for the Church of England pressed for the subject to have a greater part in the church's mission. *Going for Growth: Transformation for children, young people and the Church* (2010) and the 'Chadwick Report': *The Church School of the Future Review* (2012) pushed for renewed evangelism, not just in their own schools, but in community schools as well. Alongside this was the development of *The Christianity Project*, the role of which was expressed very clearly in the CofE Board of Education update about the Chadwick Report to the General Synod: GS1920 by Right Reverend John Pritchard (2013):

*The rationale for the Project is that all children, of all faiths and none, should be offered the opportunity for a serious engagement with the Christian faith. That is the way schools participate in the mission of the church, as expressed in Going for Growth:*

- i. *'The Church... is called to work towards every child having a life enhancing encounter with the Christian faith and the person of Jesus Christ.'*<sup>2</sup>
- ii. *There is no expectation of commitment but learning about and engaging with the faith is a necessary prerequisite for commitment especially for children and young people whose only experience of church is through the school.*

**It is clear that the resource was designed to lay the grounds for children in both church and community schools to be given the opportunity to learn about Christianity in a way that prepared them to be able to embrace the faith as their own.**

The Ofsted report *RE: Realising the Potential* (2013) and the Church of England's *Making a Difference? A Review of Religious Education in Church of England Schools* (2014) highlighted weaknesses in teaching and learning in RE, and particularly Christianity in both community and church schools. They added to the impetus to improve the quality of teaching of Christianity, particularly Christian theology. Raubach and Highton (2015) suggested that *The Christianity Project* 'was...

*... born out of a desire to address the specific problem of RE in Christian teaching. It asked how whether (sic) it was possible to develop a curriculum which would lead pupils into an understanding of the overall shape of Christian theology, and help them understand what it meant for Christians of the past and present to inhabit this shape as they conducted their lives in the world. The goal was that children would come away from RE lessons not simply knowing what happens in a church on Sunday or what the basic plot of Noah's Ark is, but with a theological understanding of why things happened the way they did on Sunday and why a story like Noah's Ark was important.*

The model developed in the project was based on three key assumptions. First, not all religions are the same. Second, the content and method of teaching should be shaped by the religion being studied. And third, in the case of Christianity this mean that narrative theology can provide a good overall framework. The second assumption, that the method for teaching a religion should be shaped by the subject material, is one which many might find contentious. If, for example, there is a 'Christian' way of learning about Christianity, how is that different from a 'Hindu' way of learning about Hinduism or a 'Jewish' way of learning about Judaism? It is hard to reconcile that assertion with a subject that should be objective, impartial and unbiased in its approach. The name '*The Christianity Project*' was subsequently changed to '*Understanding Christianity*' to make it sound less evangelical.

It fits closely with the CofE vision for the subject by encouraging children, in both church and community schools, to think creatively about God. They engage with religious texts and stories, see how these play out in the lives of Christians by using anecdotal evidence (very little, if any, is rooted in any secure data or empirical analysis) and then do some creative work on the theme they have been working on. For *Understanding Christianity* this will be one of the themes that underpin the 'grand narrative' of Christianity and the resource: God, Creation, Fall, People of God, Incarnation, Gospel, Salvation and Kingdom of God.

## LAUNCH AND RECEPTION BY THE RE COMMUNITY

There was a great deal of promotion surrounding the launch of *Understanding Christianity*. It obviously had the backing of the Church of England but also the publishers, RE Today, were able to promote it heavily. Members of the RE Today team and a select few others act as the steering group for the National Association for Teachers of Religious Education. As the resource was launched, the RE Today magazine, produced for NATRE by RE Today, was peppered with adverts for the resource and articles which functioned as advertisements as well. Some of these were written by teachers to show off work their classes had done in response to the resource but others were articles written by members of the writing team for the resource that acted as promotional advertisements for it.

There was some backlash from a series of blogs written by Alan Brine. From *The Opt-Out Clause* and the *Demon of Confessionalism* (2017):

*It is a concern that not only is confessionalism commonplace but it is being given legitimacy. We see examples of children's work quoted in official RE publications in which they are responding to the study of biblical material by using phrases like 'God shows us the right way'; 'God will always be in my life'; 'God is with us'. If the learning is structured so that pupils use the important distancing devices of 'Christians believe/most Christians think/for some Christians' all would be well. The problem is obvious the moment you imagine the next unit on Islam. If the children write 'Allah shows us the right way'; Allah will always be in my life'; Allah is with us' – you can imagine the response. Parental letters would be flowing. It is easy to understand the slip. The problem is the legitimising and celebrating of the practice in official RE publications.*

*The process of reflecting on scripture to explore any relevance of its text for modern life is a common religious practice amongst believers. It is present in the process of creating spaces for reflection on those texts. It underpins the notion that believers see their religious texts as authoritative sources of wisdom.*

*These ideas and practices have their place within the life of religious communities. Within RE it is right and proper to examine these ideas and practices within the context of an impartial study of religion and belief. However, is it appropriate for teachers to replicate this process of 'reflecting on religious material in order to explore relevance' within their own teaching and the pupils' learning?*

A vociferous objection was made by Howard (2016) and was circulated by a few SACREs (Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education) in the south west of England. This reached Torbay SACRE in an edited form where Derek Holloway had been given the opportunity to respond to the points made and put his own counter arguments. Howard invited colleagues to examine the course for themselves and Holloway echoed that sentiment, but access to the course is limited and attendance at a course lasting two and a half days is mandatory.

There have been one-hour introductions at conferences and at SACRE meetings, but these were limited in what they showed and were essentially sales pitches put forward by diocesan advisers. Howard argued that 'The *'Understanding Christianity'* handbook refers to the notion of "thinking theologically" as being at the core of the course. What is the difference between "thinking theologically" and thinking critically/dispassionately/objectively? One surely cannot think critically about religion if one strips out sociological, psychological, historical and philosophical perspectives on religion?' He railed against the 'core concepts' as defined by the resource:

*These core concepts, on their own, are not the concepts that would be required of an objective study. There is no mention of evidence, no mention of truth, or exploration of the nature of 'faith', no mention of knowledge and how it is obtained. There is no historical, psychological or sociological context. These are the concepts of a 'faith school' i.e. a school that, instead of saying, outright, they seek to convert pupils, demonstrates the bad faith of trying to convert while pretending to get people to 'think critically' (...but not too critically).*

*'Understanding Christianity' focuses on texts but without looking at what is known, and not known, about authorship, actual historical events, context and the (massive) influences of other religions on Christianity, which is, in so many fundamental ways, a clone of often-repeated themes from earlier belief systems.*

*'Understanding Christianity' looks out through a Christian perspective rather than looking in on it. It does not take the outsider's test of faith; using the same sceptical and enquiring standard that would be applied to every other faith or belief system. It privileges the Christian perspective so as to undermine critical enquiry and independent thinking. It knows that it must not indoctrinate and so instead it seeks to insinuate; but with the aim of getting the same result. Yet such insinuation is duplicitous and unscrupulous, and therefore more objectionable, morally and intellectually, than indoctrination.*

*'Understanding Christianity' is designed to draw pupils in to Christianity, and immerse them in it, rather than to draw out the skill and capacity for critical thinking. And that, no doubt, explains why the Anglican Church is enthusiastic about supporting and funding this material.*

Holloway's responses were largely to try to discredit Howard and Brine as presenters of Humanist perspectives; he noted that the Church of England did not fund the resource (RE Today and a range of other Christian charities including Culham St Gabriel's did) and reiterated the statement that *Understanding Christianity* was a resource and not a curriculum. Howard used examples from the resource to show why he felt that it lacked objectivity:

*KS3 Discuss why the Bible authors have used metaphors. Is it difficult to talk about God in concrete terms? Tell them some Christians believe that, when you talk about God, 'everything you say is wrong'. What do they mean? How can Christians say that they know God? This question presupposes that there is a God to be talked about (in any terms); that it is a coherent concept. And it privileges 'belief' over evidence. For there to be a course like this at all, privileging Christianity to such a degree, is to presuppose some kind of truth in Christianity...*

*...KS3 John presents seven statements that Jesus made, revealing snapshots of his nature and purpose. Read the seven 'I am' statements (see Resource Sheet 3). Discuss and list possible meanings. Students might be unsure at this point, but their understanding will grow as they learn more." The material presupposes that Jesus did make these statements. And that there is a person, 'John', who wrote them. Yet there is no good evidence of a 'John' who wrote 'John' and most scholars see signs of a joint effort, written long after the 'events', and edited over time.*

The response from Pett and Cooling (2018) was a reiteration of their view on the importance of theology by drawing on other proponents of theological approaches. They argued that teaching pupils to 'theologise' was a legitimate activity. The authors seek to legitimise the resource and its pedagogical approach but in doing so they completely avoid accurately representing the types of activities that are suggested for younger children to take part in. At the end of the article the authors claimed that they had no conflict of interest.

The response of many primary school teachers who had been on the training course seems to have been very positive, but as NATRE (2016) pointed out, subject knowledge is often poor due to lack of input during initial teacher training and many lack an in-depth understanding of a range of religions. Even those who identify as religious might not even know very much about the tradition they follow, particularly from an academic background. For the majority of primary RE enthusiasts there is a hunger for new resources but, without specialist subject knowledge, they have less ability to discern whether it is representing a true reflection of the religion or teaching the faith. Some examples of work from *Understanding Christianity* posted on social media have suggested that confessional responses are celebrated as evidence of good learning.

Dioceses promote the resource directly to their schools and provide topic maps to show how it can be mapped to the local syllabus. These often rely on *Understanding Christianity* as the sole resource to convey teaching of the religion. This is easy when they are using an agreed syllabus that relies solely on *Understanding Christianity* for the content of that faith, such as the Gloucestershire agreed syllabus (RE Today 'Model B'). The diocese not only provides a helpful overview,<sup>4</sup> but also supporting resources for each of the units.<sup>5</sup> The training courses have almost exclusively been provided by either members of the publishing team or diocesan advisers, many of whom are involved in supporting RE hubs that have been affiliated to NATRE. As persuasive members of SACRES, many diocesan advisers have also been in a strong position to promote the resource through those channels.

4 [www.gloucester.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Glos\\_Sample\\_Syllabus\\_Plans\\_-\\_single\\_year\\_rolling\\_programme.docx](http://www.gloucester.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Glos_Sample_Syllabus_Plans_-_single_year_rolling_programme.docx)

5 [www.gloucester.anglican.org/category/education/re-syllabus/](http://www.gloucester.anglican.org/category/education/re-syllabus/)



**Image 4:** Children drawing pictures of man being brutally put to death. Part of a display celebrated as good work and posted on Twitter by a diocesan adviser. Note the confessional language.

Some who had been involved in trialling materials for the publisher sent enthusiastic messages out on social media – these voices were then amplified by the publishers and the many parties linked to the Church of England. For many schools, it was an expensive resource that they did not have a ready budget for. Not only was it not available to see before buying, but in order to access it they were required to commit to at least two days of training and this brought additional expense in providing supply teacher cover. A £250 resource, including training, could end up costing a school over twice that once the supply costs were added.

Head teachers would expect to see it implemented after investing so heavily and there is no refund policy. It is an unusual business model, but one that has seemingly worked well for RE Today. Church schools had the added pressure of SIAMS inspections hanging over them and, with the support of a diocesan adviser, would be assured that using the resource would aid them in showing that they were matching their teaching of the subject to the *Statement of Entitlement*.

This is particularly so in voluntary aided schools where there is an even greater emphasis on teaching the faith. The Christianity element of RE in VA schools should cover at least two thirds and sometimes dioceses specify four fifths of the RE syllabus time and the subject is graded by inspectors. The easy answer for many was to rely entirely on *Understanding Christianity* for the majority of the subject. It has not been possible to ascertain exactly how many schools are relying on *Understanding Christianity* in this way, but from a survey of some of those who have published clear topic maps, it seems to be common practice in most church schools and especially so in VA schools.



## DISSEMINATION THROUGH THE AGREED SYLLABUS SYSTEM

Members of the RE Today team also assist SACREs by acting as advisers and writing agreed syllabuses. Whilst working on the *Understanding Christianity* resources there was a cross-feeding of ideas, particularly in the Worcester agreed syllabus (2015). Stephen Pett of the RE Today advisory team was acting as adviser to the SACRE and was part of the team who wrote the syllabus that was 'licensed' to them. The syllabus states that:

*Voluntary aided schools with a religious character should provide RE in accordance with the trust deed or religious designation of the school, unless parents request the locally agreed syllabus.*

*Note: The Worcester Diocesan Board of Education recommends this syllabus for adoption in Church schools, as it has been written to reflect the religious foundation of a voluntary aided school in Worcester Diocese.*

**Note that the wording suggests that it is suitable for church schools and was written to reflect the religious foundation of a voluntary aided school.** It is worth unpicking how that affects schools in Worcestershire. According to government figures,<sup>6</sup> Worcestershire has about two hundred and fifty schools. Of those, less than one hundred are Church of England schools, about sixty are voluntary controlled and less than forty are voluntary aided schools.

In many cases it is difficult to tell the school status as there has increasingly been a trend to homogenise the branding of Church of England schools as just 'CE'. This is compounded by the rise in numbers of CE academy schools which are often unclear about their legal status; some are VA and some are VC. There are now about sixty CE academy schools in Worcestershire. The typically high-profile Christian agenda in such schools and the fact that they are not tied to using a LAS means that it is likely that most would be following a VA syllabus irrespective of their status.

Normally, VC schools would follow a LAS for their RE content. This could mean as little as about a third of the content being on Christianity although it is usually interpreted to mean at least half the curriculum time to be spent on Christianity. A VA school, however, would have a much greater emphasis on teaching the Christian religion, the expectation being at least two thirds and some dioceses even promote eighty percent of curriculum time..

The same syllabus was 'licensed' to Hereford, also advised by Stephen Pett, with parallel wording, including the fact that it had been deemed as suitable for VA schools. When the same model syllabus was offered to other SACREs, the wording about it being suitable for VA schools was removed. There was no other substantive change, other than a rebranding for the authority that was 'licensing' it. The offer of a discounted set of units of work to support it was likely to be highly influential in the decision for most. RE Today have a very high profile and are generally well respected as publishers in their field. For many SACREs, especially those on a budget or with limited expertise, the offer of such resources was obviously very alluring.

Other members of the RE Today team were acting as advisers to various other SACREs, most of whom went on to adopt the RE Today syllabus. One difference in the syllabus that team member Kate Christopher made was to remove the Bible quotations from the Christianity element; this made it look less like a product written for a Christian audience and seemingly fitted in more with the way the other faiths were presented.

**An extensive search has shown that, to date, the number of authorities using the same syllabus, or a version that is almost identical to it, is about forty. It is clear that, despite the vast majority of schools being community schools, SACREs have increasingly been adopting a syllabus written so that it is compliant with the expectations of the more evangelical minority of Church of England schools.**

The notion of a syllabus being 'licensed' to an authority is a novel one. RE Today claim that they have copy-right and insist that the syllabus cannot be shared publicly. This is despite the fact that it has been agreed

6 <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/>

by a statutory body and, as such, effectively has Crown copyright. It has been paid for out of taxpayers' money and it is entirely reasonable that it should be allowed due public scrutiny.

Parents, school visitors and local places of worship who host visits from school are all denied easy access to the syllabus along with anybody else who, for whatever reason, might have an interest in what is a legal obligation for children to be taught (with the option for parental withdrawal). Despite the stipulations by RE Today, some local authorities and schools have published the syllabus online; others have been made available through freedom of information requests. Many are hosted on diocesan websites and password protected rather than being open to scrutiny on council websites as would be the norm.

The Christianity coverage in that version of the RE Today syllabus is peppered with quotes from the Bible: From the lower Key Stage 2 unit 'Why is Jesus Inspiring to some people?'

*Explore creatively some words and actions of Jesus which continue to inspire Christians today e.g. parables of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 13:1–45; sower, mustard seed, pearl etc.); parables of forgiveness (good Samaritan, Luke 10:29–37; two debtors, Luke 7:36–50; unforgiving servant, Matthew 18:21–35); hot-seat characters, freeze-frame or act out stories; create artworks; collect pupils' questions, then find out how Christians interpret these by asking some.*

No other religion is treated through 'exploring texts creatively' in the same way. As a primary RE lead I tried to implement the new syllabus and units of work but found that I could not always reconcile many of the assumptions about how Christians believed and acted with my own experience of fieldwork and the understanding I had of empirical data about the matters from sources such as Pew Research, ComRes and others, including even the Church of England's own research.

As *Understanding Christianity* was being launched, there were similarities in titles between some of the units of work in the syllabus and those within the resource. Throughout are assertions about how Christians respond to texts without recognising that it might only be a minority of Christians who actively engage with reading the Bible or see it as the central way of informing their worldview. This is confirmed by many surveys about religious beliefs and behaviours including (ComRes 2017) finding that 59% of Christians never read the Bible; when asked the question 'Would you consider yourself an active Christian who follows Jesus?' an incredible 72% of self-identifying Christians said either no or they didn't know. In 2018 another of their surveys found that only 61% of active Christians (the minority who prayed, read or listened to the Bible at least weekly and attended church at least monthly) strongly agreed that the bodily resurrection of Jesus actually occurred.

YouGov (2015) found that only 55% of self-identified Christians believe there is a God. In 2016 they found wide disparities in the beliefs of Christians: only 41% said that they definitely believed in a creator and 18% said they did not. Christians were also more likely than the broader population to believe in telepathy / psychic powers and reincarnation / past lives, none of which would come under any textbook definition of Christian belief. Almost incredibly, they were also more likely to say that they believed in aliens / UFOs than in the devil.

The data is quite conclusive that Christian religious belief is varied, fluid and far from the usual preoccupation of RE with the emphasis on teaching the orthodoxy of the faith.

A notable shift came with the 2017 Gloucestershire agreed syllabus. Stephen Pett was the adviser for the SACRE and wrote the syllabus to include units from *Understanding Christianity*. This effectively meant that, although it was possible to teach the units without buying in to the training, teachers might have felt that they were missing out – especially when enthusiasm about the resource was being widely promoted and they were not given access to the full set of resources. Stephen Pett was not only instrumental in the writing of *Understanding Christianity* but made it a core part of an agreed syllabus.

Effectively, this meant that there would be a greater take-up of people for the courses that RE Today was offering. Training courses for others to train teachers were offered and many diocesan advisers were trained to disseminate and sell the *Understanding Christianity* course. This would become the 'Model B' syllabus. Seventeen authorities now have either this syllabus or have *Understanding Christianity* embedded into theirs. With diocesan advisers often also acting as SACRE advisers this trend seems likely to continue. This means that many more community schools will be legally obliged to adopt a syllabus with an emphasis on teaching Christianity the faith rather than teaching about Christianity the religion. It also encourages greater



take-up of *Understanding Christianity* courses to help them implement the syllabus. This comment on social media<sup>7</sup> from a teacher struggling to implement the Model B syllabus without access to the *Understanding Christianity* resources:

*Hi – I am totally baffled by the new agreed syllabus for Plymouth. Without ‘The Understanding Christianity’ resource I am struggling to resource lessons for U2.1 It was sold to us at the launch as really easy but this stuff is so hard*

Five years after the Worcester and Hereford syllabuses were released, now known as the ‘RE Today Model A Syllabus’, they became due for review. According to their minutes, Stephen Pett (2019), still acting as adviser for both, offered three options:

- a) SACRE renews the licence with RE Today, which includes a supplement to insert into the 2015–2020 folder, delivered electronically. This supplement includes updates on, for example, the Commission Report, tighter requirements at KS4 and 5, assessment, and some additional guidance. This relicensing would include a ‘relaunch’ conference, to support teachers with ideas and resources.*
- b) SACRE could adopt RE Today’s more recent Syllabus Model B. This syllabus shares some DNA with the current Worcestershire syllabus, but offers a more systematic approach, incorporating questions from the Understanding Christianity resource being used in many schools, and a revised assessment model.*
- c) SACRE could commission a bespoke new syllabus from RE Today. This could reflect the Commission on RE national report recommendations closely, exemplifying its new direction for Religion and Worldviews.*

Option c is a more expensive option for a local authority so is less likely to be pursued. However, recent up-take suggests that option b, the ‘Model B’ syllabus, has been adopted by about fifteen SACREs, despite the extra cost to schools who are likely to feel a need to enrol for the training to use *Understanding Christianity*. It is almost certain that the course will be heavily promoted to such schools as an indispensable support in using the syllabus.

Although few of the RE Today ‘off the shelf’ syllabuses are officially available to download online, a number of schools have provided the syllabus on their websites. More of them have been obtained through freedom of information requests, although some councils have been extremely evasive and have been asked to conduct an internal review of their procedures. NASACRE (National Association of SACREs) guidance is clear that each syllabus is agreed by a statutory body and, whilst the writer maintains intellectual copyright, the syllabus has Crown copyright and should be in the public domain. There is no legal mechanism to license or restrict a syllabus from publication.

RE Today seem to be insistent that it must be kept away from public inspection, which is quite irregular as parents are entitled to know what their children will be learning and school visitors should be able to freely access the curriculum to gain an idea of what sort of coverage the school is looking for. As the syllabus is set by a statutory body and funded by public money, it should be freely available. NASACRE guidelines have been ignored by RE Today and many of the authorities who have adopted their syllabuses.

One item that RE Today might customise for a syllabus is to provide a breakdown of the religious makeup of that area as defined by the census data. Unfortunately, this just inflates the importance of religion unrealistically as the census question relies on the loaded question ‘What religion are you?’ and does not account for the vast majority of people who might identify as religious but do not practise in any particular way or are not at all devout. **This notion of affiliation without engagement is not reflected effectively in either model of syllabus.**

Other research into religious affiliation has shown markedly different results: YouGov (2011) found that, when asked the same question as on the census, 61% identified as belonging to a religion. When the same people were asked a follow-up question, ‘Are you religious?’ only 29% of them said ‘Yes’ while 65% said ‘No’. Moreover, less than half who identified as Christian said that they believed that Jesus Christ was a real person who died, came back to life and was the son of God. Other polls have found similar discrepancies between religious affiliation and religious beliefs. This is rarely reflected in RE curricula and is not a feature of *Understanding Christianity*.

7 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/primaryre/permalink/472545819964655>

Accommodating the *Understanding Christianity* resource has been problematic for some SACREs, as Somerset have noted in their preamble to the 2019 syllabus:

*Schools have also complained that the new exemplars follow the old units of study instead of explicitly meeting the requirement of the new assessment objectives... While this difficulty is present for all our schools, it is compounded for church schools by the introduction of Understanding Christianity, a resource of classroom materials to teach about Christianity. The requirement to follow both the assessment objectives and units of study, and to also use the Understanding Christianity resource, has proven unnecessarily difficult for schools. One of guiding principles for the syllabus review was not to burden schools with more work.*

The issue of whether to try to integrate, or allow for, *Understanding Christianity* has had an impact on other SACREs. Some (e.g. Bristol, Bath, North Somerset, Haringey) have shown how to fit some of the units in.<sup>8</sup> A smaller number of SACREs, such as Bournemouth and Poole, Hertfordshire and Surrey have produced a syllabus that encompasses the *Understanding Christianity* themes so that the use of the resource is more compatible with the syllabus structure.

At the launch it was sold as 'a complete resource for teaching Christianity'. I asked whether it would be reasonable to expect it to cover all of the requirements for teaching and learning Christianity, on social media (2016). Fiona Moss, a member of the RE Today team, simply answered 'Yes'. As time passed, some people found that it was not a balanced approach. This was accepted by Blaylock (2018) during an exchange on Facebook. He suggested that 'UC is a resource, not a syllabus, not intended to be a full programme of learning for Christianity 4–14, but about half of a programme.' But the 'Model B' syllabus relies entirely on the units from *Understanding Christianity* for the coverage of Christianity. A survey of school topic maps shows that some of them have been relying entirely on *Understanding Christianity* for their content on that faith and have clearly not read or understood the caveats that are on the *Understanding Christianity* website.<sup>9</sup>

This was compounded by the development of a greater number of 'diocesan syllabuses' which were produced to ensure that teaching in their schools fitted with the Church of England's vision for religious education. A survey of 'diocesan syllabuses' and CEVA school topic maps suggests that many of them seem to rely heavily on *Understanding Christianity* to deliver the Christianity content.

See this example from a VA school<sup>10</sup> using the Blackburn Diocesan Syllabus. These 'diocesan syllabuses' are usually deemed to be mandatory for VA schools and their academies (which might be VC). There is often the implication that it is for **all** CE schools – and the distinction has become so blurred in many cases that some teachers I have been in communication with are unsure of whether their own school is VA or VC and what difference that actually makes. For other schools, especially those who have adopted an RE Today syllabus, these same topic maps are used to 'help support teachers to integrate the resource' in their schools. Gloucester Diocese offer supporting resources, but the syllabus appears to be exactly the same as the RE Today Model B version including *Understanding Christianity*.<sup>11</sup>

**In total, RE Today have written or strongly influenced over sixty of the just over one hundred and fifty locally agreed syllabuses. By September 2020 at least seventeen syllabuses will have Understanding Christianity embedded so that the resource is effectively mandatory for all schools in that authority, apart from the non-church academies, Catholic and other faith schools who have their own syllabuses. This means that many schools in an authority with an RE Today syllabus are legally obliged to follow what is, effectively, a Church of England syllabus written to accommodate the expectations of a voluntary aided school whether they have a Christian foundation or not.**

8 <http://www.awarenessmysteryvalue.org/2016/g10-understanding-christianity-matching-with-ks2-amv-units/>

9 <http://www.understandingchristianity.org.uk/the-project/what-this-resource-is-not/>

10 <https://primarysite-prod-sorted.s3.amazonaws.com/stcuthbertscofeprimary/UploadedDocument/54c54dab34294dd1ac2418db2b6956c8/our-re-curriculum-18-19.pdf>

11 <https://www.gloucester.anglican.org/category/education/re-syllabus/>

## A CRITIQUE OF *UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY*

In 2017 I attended an *Understanding Christianity* course. It was a persuasive introduction to the resource and the clear explanation of how the themes fitted into ‘the grand narrative’ of Christianity made it look appealing. The course consisted of one whole day and two half-day sessions. The sheer size and amount of written material in the resource came as a shock; there was a clear expectation that the teachers attending would be investing a significant amount of time beyond the training sessions in order to digest the information, select material from it and use it. It was not ready-made planning and there seemed to be relatively few resource sheets for each of the units of work.

On examining the resource, it was clear that there were some activities that were entirely suitable for introducing in the CEVC primary school I was teaching in. On the other hand, there were also issues that I found making it difficult to teach the subject in a balanced way. There were also many activities that seemed tailored more towards occupying children with work that was, on the surface, enjoyable but not the best use of time when I was constrained to one hour a week per class. Producing triptychs on the Trinity (as just one example) might make a nice display but does little to promote an understanding of the subject matter.



Image 5

As Larkin et al (2020) put it:

*We argue that a focus on creative activities in primary RE restricts children’s view of religions, reducing them to a collection of artefacts, symbols and stories that can be re-created and manipulated and implies that RE as a subject is only about personal interpretation.*

At first glance just some of the titles that are leading questions are an early warning of bias: ‘Who Made the World?’ and ‘What is the Good News Jesus Brings?’ are leading questions that feature in Key Stage 1, whilst ‘What Did Jesus do to Save Human Beings?’, ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ and ‘What Kind of King is Jesus?’ are features of Key Stage 2.

Key Stage 1 follows the common tendency in RE to start younger children off with an uncritical pattern of telling stories that are important to Christians, much as you might do in a Sunday school.

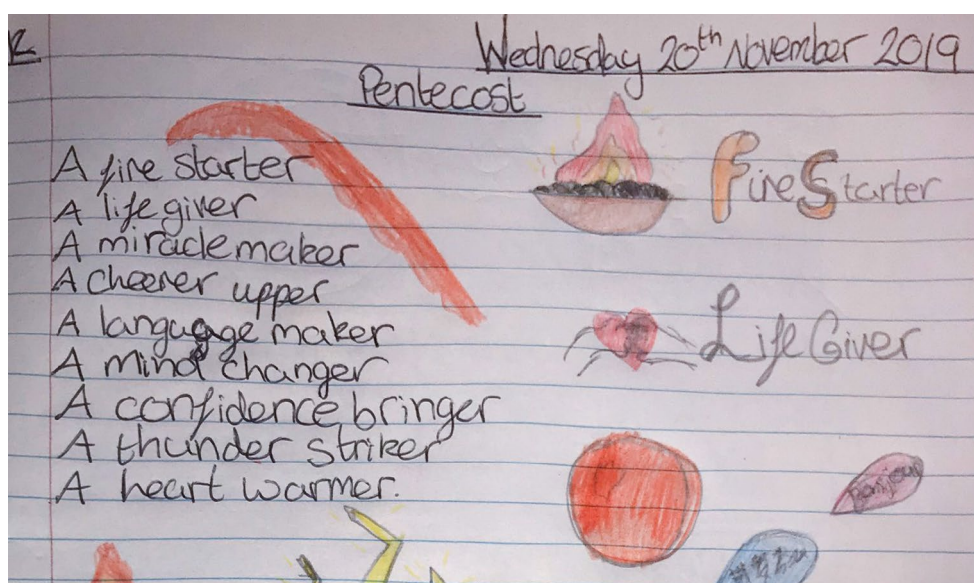


Young children are encouraged to listen to, choose favourites from and even join in with evangelical songs. They are asked to write poetry on the persons of the Trinity and contribute to displays with an evangelical message. They are even asked to write prayers or reflections on what they have learnt so that they can be used for display. Clearly, this would go down well in a church school, particularly one where they were expecting a SIAMS inspection. There is too much reliance on resources that might be used in a church school assembly instead of what could or should be used if the subject is meant to be objective, critical and pluralistic.

Portrayals of Jesus as a man of peace who extends love to all others might reflect how many Christians see him, but there is no coverage of how contradictory Jesus could be at times, as Aslan (2013) points out: 'As a Jew, Jesus was concerned exclusively with the fate of his fellow Jews. Israel was all that mattered to Jesus. He insisted that his mission was "solely to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24) and commanded his disciples to share the good news with none but their fellow Jews: "Go nowhere near the gentiles and do not enter the city of the Samaritans" (Matthew 10: 5-6)'. Aslan adds that: 'There is no evidence that Jesus himself openly advocated violent actions. But he was certainly no pacifist. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace, but the sword" (Matthew 10:34 | Luke 12:51)'.

There is no acknowledgement of the conflict between the Jerusalem church and Paul. The historicity of the gospels is not questioned and the role of Paul in commissioning them is neglected. They are presented as eye-witness accounts rather than the biased promotion of a vision of a person whom Paul never met 'in the flesh'. This lack of coverage of the historical perspective of the development of Christian beliefs is a serious omission and tends to depict Christian teachings as timeless and uncontroversial.

The rationale espoused throughout the resource is that you can teach Christianity by using a 'text – impact – connections' model. The first major flaw in this thinking is that it is a resource to teach Christianity – not to teach about Christianity. It teaches a predominantly traditional Protestant version of the faith whilst making passing mentions to other denominations without placing them in any socio-historical context for pupils. The next serious issue is that it teaches largely from a homogenised perspective that assumes that biblical texts have an impact that affects the behaviour of Christians. This is illustrated with anecdotal evidence (there is no statistical evidence to support any of the claims). The children then make a response about how what they are studying connects with their own life. It is here that they are invited to think about what it would mean to be a Christian and how helpful it would be in terms of, for example, having a comforter and a guide in their lives.



**Image 6:**  
Year seven  
writing  
kennings  
about the  
Holy Spirit.

It's quite an astonishing approach compared to learning about a religion from a more pragmatic, methodologically agnostic and sociological model which would rely on empirical data to back up any assertions.

The notion that Christians learn 'stewardship' and respect for the environment from reading the creation story in Genesis is one example. The evidence is purely anecdotal and based on three different and unusually devout Christian examples. Vaidyanathan et al (2018) interviewed one hundred and sixty-nine religious

people about their attitudes towards the environment and how they gained them. They found that ‘... while most people admit that their religious beliefs justify caring for the environment, they did not see these beliefs as motivators of their actions.’ Societal pressures were creating the attitude and the religious beliefs were used to justify the actions.

The Bible uses the word ‘dominion’ rather than ‘stewardship’ in Genesis. The notion of ‘stewardship’ is a relatively modern theological innovation and the Bible certainly has no incitements to save energy or recycle waste, in fact the ‘end times are near’ theme has led to Christianity being criticised by some, most notably White, (1967), for its role in the environmental crises we currently face. In defence of the resource, this is mentioned in Key Stage 3, but there is no reason why Upper Key Stage 2 children could not engage with this sort of debate. I know of no British empirical data on the subject, but Pew Research (2016) found that:

*... highly religious people are about as likely as other Americans to say they lost their temper recently, and they are only marginally less likely to say they told a white lie in the past week. When it comes to diet and exercise, highly religious Americans are no less likely to have overeaten in the past week, and they are no more likely to say they exercise regularly. Highly religious people also are no more likely than other Americans to recycle their household waste. And when making decisions about what goods and services to buy, they are no more inclined to consider the manufacturers’ environmental records or whether companies pay employees a fair wage.*

**The lack of centrality of the Bible as a guide for life for the majority of Christians is confirmed by ComRes’ research (2017), commissioned by the Church of England, which has identified that more than half of Christians and over 60 % of Anglicans in this country never read the Bible; less than 10 % read the Bible at least monthly.**

Furthermore, ComRes (2018) interviewed two hundred and fifty practising Christians, defined as those who ‘pray at least weekly, read/listen to the Bible at least weekly and attend church at least monthly’ and found that 71% of them agreed with the statement ‘Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God’ – which is not a belief expressed by any mainstream Christian denomination. Put simply, most practising Christians (the minority) do not have a well-developed theological literacy. It is most likely that, for most people who attend church on a regular basis, the most important aspect of their religious experience is being part of a community of like-minded people sharing in ritual behaviour. Bradley (2020) states that:

*Research that I have conducted over many years suggests that congregational hymns are the most widely enjoyed element of worship and that many churchgoers remember them when the sermon and prayers have been forgotten... Many people get their theology from the hymns that they have sung since childhood and which become ingrained in their consciousness through frequent repetitions.*

The resource does refer to the importance of hymns and different forms of music across several denominations and uses examples from the My Life, My Religion series that the RE Today team helped advise on. But it does not acknowledge that, for the minority of Christians who attend church regularly, these might drive their theology more than the Bible.

Prayer is also presented as a central aspect of Christian life, but ComRes (2017) found that almost a third of Anglicans never pray at all and less than a third pray monthly or more often. It does the same for church attendance, leaving children with the misunderstanding that most, if not all, Christians regularly attend services. The National Centre for Social Research (2019), points out that:

*Weekly attendance is highest among those of non-Christian faiths (40%), followed by Roman Catholic (23%) and other Christian denominations (23%). Those identifying as Anglicans are much less likely to attend weekly (9%) or indeed to attend at all – 57% say they attend ‘never or practically never’.*

By missing out on studying the historical development of the religion, *Understanding Christianity* does nothing to explain why there is such diversity in the religion. By neglecting the history of the Church and Christian thought it fails to acknowledge the role of Paul in reshaping the cult of Christianity into a new religion. It neglects the background to the various schisms and break-off sects that have arisen over the centuries, making it an incredibly diverse faith. This neglect of the historical dimension results in the treatment of

Christian theology as timeless and unchanging. It paints a false, near-monolithic depiction of a dynamic and multi-faceted religion.

By emphasising the positive impacts of Christianity, it helps to perpetuate the essentialising of religion in the way that has been identified as a serious weakness in religious education by Smith, Nixon and Pearce (2018) as they conclude:

*A clear essentializing motif is evident in some UK RE teachers' conceptualizations of religion. Rather than an abstract nicety, this approach not only erects a barrier to the understanding of religion as a diverse, and rich, phenomenon, but it conceptually impoverishes children and young people, by replacing RE with a shallow alternative unfit to make sense of the world. In the pursuit of understanding, children and young people need to learn how to be able to resist and condemn anti-social articulations of religion which engender harm, without resorting to crude essentialism. A mature understanding of religion is required which is able to encompass, and to reflect, the very best and worst of religious expression—and all of the shades of the spectrum in-between. While this makes the UK RE teachers' task all the more challenging, it also re-affirms the educational value of RE and its rightful place within the curricula of the UK.*

The ComRes (2017) report ends with the caveat: 'Those making blanket or unnuanced claims about the influence of faith or religion or making claims about "the religious" or "Christians" might want to take care.' *Understanding Christianity* is littered with assumptions about what Christians believe and how they act based upon (mainstream Protestant) church teachings. It completely fails to accept the widespread 'theological incorrectness' where believers claim to be Christian yet can act in very un-Christian ways, and the common disparity between belief and practice and the simple fact, as Xygalatas (2017) points out, that 'religiosity is only loosely related to theology' – citing study after study that confirm that religion and morality have very tenuous links and that religious people are no more moral than atheists.

Pett (2018) discussed insider and outsider views on religion as part of his keynote address at the Strictly RE conference of 2017. He promoted the *Understanding Christianity* resource to an audience of RE teachers and suggested that:

*...a hermeneutical approach allows pupils to situate themselves with regard to the ideas they study in RE, and to situate the ideas they are studying. They may then open themselves to having their views and positions changed as a result of their study, as they integrate their learning into their wider understanding. In this way, their exploration is not about neutrality and objectivity, but more about self-awareness, openness and honesty. Where do you stand on those?*

It almost parallels the role of the subject as defined by Lord Runcie when he was Archbishop of Canterbury: 'to nourish those of the faith; to encourage those of other faiths; to challenge those who have no faith.' This is not honesty, but a perversion of the subject, particularly when the hermeneutical approach he was discussing applied only to Christianity. *Understanding Christianity* acknowledges that it is an unusual approach, and one that is particularly recognisable to an insider, but fails to mention that it would match the understanding of the most devout minority of Anglicans rather than the majority of Christians.

Teachers have struggled with planning from the resource due to the sheer size of it. An *Understanding Christianity* Facebook group set up by a teacher for others to help each other is regularly used by members who are requesting planning to accompany units of work. Calls for help such as this are commonplace:

*Hi! I'm starting to look at planning next half term's RE. My topics are 'God—what is the Trinity' (which I've done a little bit on before and my other topic is 'Gospel—What kind of world did Jesus want?') I just wondered if anyone has taught either of these before and if you have any fab lesson ideas I could pinch please? Thank you—I'm a bit lost on the Understanding Christianity minefield<sup>12</sup>*

The resource is so big that busy primary school teachers struggle to cope with the amount of time it takes to read through each of the units and cherry-pick the activities that match their classes' needs. As previously mentioned, many schools – and not just CofE schools are relying on the resource for much, and in some

12 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/166552656353761/permalink/1685241394895611> 22nd May 2018



instances all, of their Christianity content despite assertions that it is just a resource and the free admission that it has limitations and omissions due to the approach taken.

*I must admit I struggle with the reception part of the scheme. It just doesn't start from the children's own experiences and fails to engage them. I tend to take the learning objectives and look around for other resources to teach them. Sorry if that is not very positive but it is really hard to teach and I know from recent training that I am not the only one finding this to be the case.<sup>13</sup>*

The fact that it is not available for pre-inspection apart from occasional sessions in training programmes or presentations to SACRE members, which are both forms of sales pitches for the resource, means that it is not open to academic critique. It seems that the practice of keeping their resources safeguarded in such a way might protect their copyright, but also protects them from wider scrutiny. This of course also affects parents, who are unlikely to have had access to scrutinise the resource or gain a clear understanding of what activities their children are likely to be doing in RE.

The heavy investment that schools have to make in training just to access the materials has wider implications. The resources are obviously promoted robustly in those sessions and there is an expectation that the schools will start to implement the resource after the first session. This also means running a staff meeting on the resource to help other members of the school team understand how to implement it. Any head teacher is likely to expect such a scale of investment in supply costs and training fees to be realised by using the resource, especially in a church school where there is an explicit expectation to teach 'thinking theologically'.

Having been on a course and tried to implement some of the units, I found that there are many exercises in the resource that would be suitable for use in RE lessons in any school, but the way the resource is structured makes it hard just to dip in and out of. Certainly, the teachers I worked with who also taught RE found the amount of effort needed to plan from it unnecessarily burdensome and simply refused to use it. If a school is teaching 'the big story' and using the frieze that tells it then it ties the school in to a particular way of teaching Christianity that is connected to those themes. It makes it hard to pick out the best resources and fit those into a coherent multi-disciplinary approach.

The expectations for younger pupils tend to impose contested ideas on very young minds. Pupils in EYFS and Key Stage 1 are ill-equipped to discern from such leading information whether the stories they are being taught carry any truth or not. Children are asked to join in with songs that express Christian beliefs. The songs they are being asked to sing carry truth claims that will likely be at odds with the beliefs (or lack of belief) of their parents or carers.

All of the above might sit very well with the ethos of a church school but puts it at odds with the usual aims of RE as being impartial, methodologically agnostic and non-coercive. It is a resource that is being promoted as suitable for all schools. As Nigel Genders says in the introduction book:

*We wanted this resource to be available not just for Church of England schools but for all schools across the country as part of the Church of England's offer of education for the common good.*

'The common good' from an evangelical perspective is unlikely to coincide with how most people might interpret that phrase.

It sits at odds with the way that other faiths are approached in RE and results in a subject that has skewed methodologies and emphases across different traditions. The emphasis on an insider approach serves to result in an 'othering' of broader religions and worldviews.

The way that it is being disseminated through some agreed syllabuses now makes it hard to argue against the fact that the Christian hegemony over the subject has affected the possibility of RE being broad, balanced and objective. The Toledo Guiding Principles for Preparing Curricula (2007) state that:

*Teaching about religions and beliefs should be sensitive, balanced, inclusive, **non-doctrinal**, impartial, and based on human rights principles relating to freedom of religion or belief. This implies that*

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1665526563533761/> 8th March 2020

*considerations relating to the freedom of religion or belief should pervade any curricula developed for teaching about religions and beliefs. It is expected that curricula will adhere to recognized professional standards. This implies that, among other things, **the information contained in curricula is based on reason, is accurate, bias-free, up to date, and does not over-simplify complex issues.***

The authors will insist that it is not a curriculum and 'is only a resource', but it is such a weighty resource (the introductory booklet alone stretches to sixty-four pages), and in some circumstances forms such a large part of the curriculum, particularly in CofE schools and those that are subject to the RE Today 'Model B' syllabus, that it distorts the balance of the subject.

The marked shift in the way that the material is handled in Key Stage 3 protects it from too much criticism from secondary teachers, who are more likely to have studied religions or theology at university. Their resources really are much better quality, less prone to bias, and paradoxically, easier to use than those written for the primary phase. The focus still remains, however on conveying traditional Protestant interpretations of the Bible and expecting children to engage with the texts. The emphasis on Bible studies to the detriment of learning about religion and worldviews is continued with, for example, year eight pupils being asked to write prophetic rants for today in the style of the prophet Amos. It is a very unusual way of learning about a religion or worldview.

In many ways it has been an exercise that might have been more effective in developing widespread theological literacy if it had been made far lighter and more accessible with simple lesson plans and easy to use resources. It could have been far cheaper to disseminate, and training costs could have been negligible, but it would have been harder to tie teachers in to relying on its own pedagogical style and framework. Certainly, a more lightweight resource would have been much easier to build into the broader repertoire of approaches to studying religion that the church is now espousing as a result of the work of Kathryn Wright et al on 'a balanced curriculum' featuring a 'multi-disciplinary approach'.

## WHAT IS THE FUTURE FOR RE / R&W?

A key driving factor in the way the subject is likely to develop is the way the subject is financed and the powers that control it. The Church of England has its brand on about a third of primary schools and is looking to expand its reach by investing in the academy sector and training for leadership to push its mission forward. With a government that is unwilling to upset the status quo and curtail the spread of faith schools, there is little to prevent it. The CofE has a clear agenda to reach out to younger audiences, knowing full well that, without fresh believers, it has a bleak future. Brown and Woodhead's *That was the Church That Was* (2016) makes it abundantly clear that the Church has failed to keep track with changes in society and, as a result, has suffered massive decline. Yet that decline in attendance and engagement has not been reflected in the amount of influence the Church has on the political and educational landscape of the country. Paradoxically, that has risen to the extent that it now has gained, with its evangelical partners, close to a monopoly over the way the subject is managed and taught.

Most community schools might seem to be so divorced from the Church of England that it would not have a significant impact on their religious education provision. Yet Christian trusts fund almost every aspect of the subject in this country. SACREs have to have the Church of England as one of their four voting committees; other denominations and faiths make up another group, whilst teachers and local councillors make up the other two. A few SACREs are now including Humanist reps in their faith committees but the majority of people who do not identify as religious do not qualify to be on a voting committee, even if they have specialist subject knowledge.

Naturally, the RE Today advisers have been instrumental in almost exclusively introducing their syllabuses in areas where they work. Diocesan advisers and other people with strong church links often double as SACRE advisers which could easily lead to muddying of the waters between the roles. That isn't to say that many of them are not doing an excellent job of promoting good RE, but if they believe in the Church of England's *Vision for Education* and see the CofE *Statement of Entitlement* as representing good RE for all schools then it will be difficult to separate the roles, particularly as an employee bound by a contract that expects them to work within the Church ethos.

The matter of working within the Church of England ethos reaches into teacher training and resourcing. In 2019, Culham St Gabriel's advertised for a new Chief Executive Officer. The person spec included: **'Engaging entrepreneurially with the wider RE, faith and educational communities, through speaking, writing, research and membership of networks, in order to lead and influence thinking, research, training, teaching and policy on RE'** and was closed with an 'essential' attribute, **'Knowledge and understanding of, and sympathy with, the Church of England.'** Questioning the rationale behind such a stipulation led to being pointed towards the funding of the charity. To put it simply, they wanted someone to lead on the Church of England understanding of what constitutes good RE. The person who was appointed, Kathryn Wright, was a well-respected, high-profile Church of England diocesan adviser. As previously outlined, her work with other diocesan advisers has been instrumental in helping to reform the CofE *Statement of Entitlement* to encompass the 'multi-disciplinary approach' that is exemplified in the Norfolk Agreed Syllabus<sup>14</sup> (2019), *A Religious Education for the Future*. There were contributions also from Richard Kueh, who is now the National Subject Lead for RE at Ofsted, and Kate Christopher, who was a member of the RE Today team of advisers. It mentions the Commission on RE recommendations in their report but echoes the words of Derek Holloway by seeing them as organising principles for a syllabus rather than guiding the content:

*Whilst the suggested national entitlement contained in the report is not a foundational principle for the syllabus outlined here, there is synergy between what is proposed and the focus on 'the different ways in which religion and worldviews can be understood, interpreted and studied, including through a wide range of academic disciplines and through direct encounter and discussion with individuals and communities who hold these worldviews.'*

14 [www.schools.norfolk.gov.uk/-/media/schools/files/teaching-and-learning/religious-education-agreed-syllabus/norfolk-religious-education-agreed-syllabus-2019.pdf](http://www.schools.norfolk.gov.uk/-/media/schools/files/teaching-and-learning/religious-education-agreed-syllabus/norfolk-religious-education-agreed-syllabus-2019.pdf)

The syllabus is refreshingly brief and to the point. It has the three disciplinary areas of theology, philosophy and social sciences that the Church of England has embraced as a good model for the subject. It does draw from *Understanding Christianity* but without scrutiny of any accompanying units of work it is not possible to say how closely it follows the resource. What is available online contains similar activities to many other syllabuses, such as Key Stage 1 children writing about what they think God is like. There seems to have been little actual change to the activities taking part in RE lessons, and certainly no substantive acknowledgement of the *Statement of Entitlement* as outlined in the Commission on RE's report.

Culham St Gabriel's contributes much to the subject. It offers a broad range of CPD opportunities for teachers. These include the *Teach: RE* courses which include the DfE funded Subject Knowledge Enhancement course for those in initial teacher training as well as a range of other options including partial funding for teachers to study for a master's degree. They also support, with NATRE, a national network of local RE Hubs led by selected teachers and supported by resources produced by NATRE / RE Today. They also manage the open access RE: Online website which is a well-established, highly regarded place for teachers to turn to for free resources, subject knowledge and lesson ideas. In a recent revamp to the site, some of the content was removed, particularly some out-of-date material, and new resources have been added. Blogs by Brine were initially removed but later reinstated. Recent additions about curriculum design have neglected the *Big Ideas in RE* approach espoused by Wintersgill et al which was highly influential on the Core Statement of Entitlement. Instead it has been the '*Balanced Curriculum*' model which fits with the C of E vision for the subject.

In 2020 they launched their new [vision for the trust](#)<sup>15</sup>:

*Our new vision is for a broad based, critical and reflective education in religion and world-views contributing to a well-informed, respectful and open society. We are deliberately using the language of religion and worldviews supporting the vision of the Commission on RE (2018) and look forward to the shaping of this newly defined subject over the coming year... In addition, we have emphasised, that high-quality religion and worldviews is not an end in itself but contributes to the transformation of society. This is really important for us as a charity. Above all, we exist to make a difference.*

Their mission has six strands:

- Increasing public understanding of religion and worldviews education
- Engaging with, informing and influencing decision makers
- Creating well-informed, empowered and influential educationalists
- Establishing and building strategic and collaborative partnerships and networks
- Commissioning and publishing focused and accessible research
- Championing and developing inspired and well-resourced teaching and learning

**Culham St Gabriel's is a charity with its objects in accordance with the doctrines and principles of the Church of England.**

The partnering between Culham St Gabriel's, RE Today, NATRE (sponsored by RE Today and guided by a steering group that is largely presided over by their advisers with co-opted executives including Kathryn Wright) also includes the Religious Education Council. The board of ten people is very experienced in the field but is dominated by those with Christian interests, particularly Trevor Cooling (Chair), Kathryn Wright and Derek Holloway. In June they appointed Mike McMaster of Barnabas Consulting Ltd to act as the interim executive officer. He was, until August 2019, business development officer for RE Today. In order to progress with implementing the Commission on RE final report they have a team of thirteen academics working towards a clearer working definition of the term 'worldview'. They are also working towards producing materials to exemplify what a curriculum based on the *Statement of Entitlement* might look like. There were four bids tendered and RE Today Services were selected by the panel to be tasked with the job. It was a likely choice given their experience at producing resources and working as SACRE advisers and curriculum writers. Although some of the RE Today staff had a reserved response when the report was published, in a blog on RE: Online, Kate Christopher (2019) argued for recommendation number three: national programmes of study.

<sup>15</sup> [www.cstg.org.uk/about-us/our-vision/](http://www.cstg.org.uk/about-us/our-vision/)

*What existing models can we look at to judge this proposal? RE Today's Understanding Christianity and Model Syllabuses are good examples. Either, or both, of these syllabuses allows SACREs or trusts to access practical, coherent curricula at a standard they would be unable to create on their own.*

Unusually, she called *Understanding Christianity* a syllabus – although it forms a large part of the 'Model B' syllabus they produce. It is even conceivable that such material could become part of a scheme of work to exemplify the CoRE *Statement of Entitlement*. Indeed, the expectations laid out in the report are so broad and open to interpretation that Andy Lewis in Castelli and Chater (2018), a leading Catholic teacher, asserted that what he teaches would likely already fit the recommendations for a common baseline of study.

**It is abundantly clear now that so much power in the subject lies in the hands the Church of England and its evangelical partners that a major shift is needed in the way the subject is funded and managed.**

## CONCLUSIONS

RE is one of the least valued subjects in the curriculum (YouGov 2018). The NATRE (2016) survey of primary schools highlighted that inadequate provision of RE was widespread. Teachers often have very poor subject knowledge. With less than four hundred respondents it is likely that only schools more engaged in the subject responded. In half of schools RE was delivered by a higher level teaching assistant, often done in a teacher's planning and preparation time. The EBacc omitting RE, and academisation have also had a huge impact on provision for the subject. In short, most of the general public as well as school leaders and teachers do not value the subject. The schools where there is most interest are the faith schools, and the majority of those are Church of England schools.

A review of the syllabuses that are used nationally shows that most follow a very similar pattern and are based on the Non-Statutory Framework for RE (Department for Education, 2010) or the National Curriculum Framework for RE (RE Council 2014). Both still have a strong emphasis on Christianity as the basis in Key Stage 1 – assuming, perhaps, that children need to understand one religion before they can cope with diversity. The RE Today syllabus continues that tradition. Despite its many failings, it is in many respects as good as, and sometimes better, than many others in circulation. This is mainly due to the fact that it is backed by easy to use planning which schools can buy at a discount from the publishers at syllabus launches. It makes the syllabus very appealing to SACREs who are short on funding and expertise, as well as teachers who are pushed for time and often lack subject knowledge.

The drive for reform from the Commission on RE has been used as a leverage by RE Today to argue that the 'Model B' syllabus incorporating *Understanding Christianity* fits more closely with the CoRE recommendations, despite the fact that the resource was written well before the commission published their findings. *Understanding Christianity* is incongruent with Wintersgill's *Big Ideas in RE* (2017) – a response to the many calls for reform mentioned previously. It was a 'back to the drawing board' approach that produced a set of overarching themes that should underpin the subject. It was highly influential on the CoRE final recommendations that also suggested that the subject should have a far wider disciplinary field as well as greater breadth in content – the ambition being for pupils to see 'the big picture' of the subject. Unfortunately, the recommendations are so open to interpretation that little might change.

Theology as a subject at university has steadily changed, particularly since the 1970s, to account for a more plural society. But there are still departments which specialise in a more devotional approach, particularly appealing to those who might be heading for a life of ministry or evangelism. Theology can share some common ground with religious studies but it is such a vague term and there are so many theologies that it fails to define a distinct discipline, let alone a credible methodological approach to studying a vast range of worldviews. Arguments that theology is somehow more rigorous in the study of religion are facile: any discipline can be rigorously applied and to neglect broader disciplines belittles the subject. But, just as importantly, the focus on texts and theological literacy is of interest only to a small proportion of Christians in this country. It is a minority activity for the enthusiast.

From my own fieldwork, post-service discussions are more likely to be about the choice of hymns than the theological implications of the readings or sermon that Sunday. For most practising Christians (the minority), belonging to a community and the benefits that they feel from shared practices are far more important than theological concerns.

The subject is funded and led by organisations funded by Christian trusts. Many leaders of these organisations have a background of studying theology at university. This has resulted in a disproportionate preoccupation with texts and a focus on beliefs and doctrines that far exceeds what is needed for a pragmatic, 'functional' form of religious literacy. Texts do not dictate the actions of Christians, but wider society and cultural shifts cause them to reinterpret and focus on different aspects of their texts to justify their beliefs. The Bible has been used to justify slavery, antisemitism, racism, misogyny and no end of other ideals most people would consider to be distasteful, but times change, so do societal values and theology follows societal trends.



Rebalancing the subject to have more of a socio–historical or anthropological approach would give a more holistic, realistic and empirically verifiable picture of religion and how it interacts with wider society. This would be an approach that would equip pupils with a better form of religious literacy for life in a religiously plural society.

Few of the leaders of the subject have shown significant support for reforming the content of the subject to fit with the vision of the commissioners or the pragmatic form of religious literacy as espoused by Dinham and Shaw (2016). The compromises made have left a form of RE that fits with the Church of England’s vision for the subject, even where it is masquerading behind the name ‘religion and worldviews’. It seems clear that in order for the subject to shake off the vestiges of confessionalism there has to be a complete remodelling of the way that the subject is administered, resourced, taught and monitored.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**To gain wider credibility with the general public and to enable it to lose the controversial right to withdraw, RE has to become a secular subject taught from an objective, critical and pluralistic viewpoint.** It

needs to stand outside the worldviews being studied, whilst attempting to develop empathy for what it might mean to hold them. It can observe the behaviours of religious and non-religious people, but to adopt their practices opens it too easily to charges of confessionalism, whether that is intended or just implied by using that approach. Studying various theologies and the societal forces that drive them is very different from being a theologian.

RE, or whatever name is chosen for the subject, cannot rely on assumptions of how groups of people behave without backing them up with verifiable empirical data. It has to be factual about the real, lived experience of people with a diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews – the devout as well as the vast majority who just identify as religious but do not practise. It needs to reflect how faith groups have a role in society and interact with politics both locally and globally. It cannot reflect just the salient and benign aspects of religion but also needs to address the paradoxes and problematic aspects that both institutionalised and extremist religions raise. It has to be fit for the purpose of equipping young people to be discerning of truth claims and sources of evidence whilst allowing them to attempt to understand a wide range of worldviews that they might find very different from their own. It might show the effect on how being or becoming religious can enrich and enhance an individual's life but it also needs to show how religions can ensnare people and that for some, finding freedom from religion is also empowering, liberating and life enhancing. That would be 'balanced RE'.

It does not even have to be a discrete subject as it could be built into a wider humanities or social studies curriculum that covers diversity in a far wider range of forms, not just religious diversity. If this was built into a compulsory scheme for all schools, then the argument for removing the right to withdrawal would be far more tenable. This, however, would require a major change to the way that education is structured in the UK, including the concessions given to academies that they need not follow the national curriculum and faith schools being allowed to control their own form of RE.

The Church of England has a privileged position in our political and state structures; this gives it a disproportionate amount of power compared to the demographic that they represent. Until there is disestablishment and a government prepared to stand up to the religious lobbyists, it is unlikely that there will be any significant legal reform or change in the subject. Teachers are often poorly trained in the primary phase and those in secondary are often driven by exam specifications rather than wider religious literacy. If reform is to come it has to be 'root and branch', with a thorough examination of what young pupils need to know as well as significant changes to GCSE specifications.

SACREs, while we have them, need to take greater care to be accountable to the majority of the general public who do not see RE as being a high-value subject. They need to be transparent about the syllabuses and resources that they are deciding on for schools. In the longer term, the many calls for SACREs to be reformed need to be heeded, and although they can play a vital role in providing local support for the subject, the outdated structure needs to be remodelled so that they can more accurately represent the communities they serve and have academic credibility.

Financing for leadership and control of the subject needs to be from central government rather than a range of Christian trusts that exert a disproportionate amount of control, ultimately preventing the subject from being independent and unbiased. It needs to be steered by academics and teachers with an interest in a realistic, pragmatic and academically credible form of the subject that reflects the realities of the religious landscape. The problem comes when trying to decide who should select such people. Unfortunately, that is inevitably going to be influenced by power groups such as the Church of England.

It begs the question of whether it is time to start seriously considering whether the wholesale restructuring of the subject is at all possible. Is it even redeemable or might it be time to consider a new subject that teaches about diversity in a far wider way? A subject that encompasses wider cultural, political, religious and societal diversity and how they interact might be far more beneficial to pupils who are growing up in an increasingly pluralistic, yet mainly non-religious society.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Selway was awarded a first-class degree in the Study of Religions at Bath Spa University in 1999. This involved notable amounts of fieldwork, including participant observation, particularly in diverse forms of Christianity and Buddhism. He then went on to train as a primary school teacher and became subject leader for RE in a church school for almost two decades, the last few years teaching RE across Key Stage 2. He supported the school in gaining 'Outstanding' in a SIAMS inspection under the old framework where his leadership and innovative practice was praised. A key aspect in his teaching was bringing the subject to life by running a broad programme of trips and visitors. He was awarded a Farmington Scholarship in 2015 to research the use of trips and visitors in RE. This involved working alongside new faith representatives to encourage and enhance their work with schools, including fieldwork within their communities. He introduced approaches to the use of trips and visitors that both deepened and broadened the learning experience for his pupils. He later wrote about this in the Professional Reflections part of RE Today magazine. He joined South Gloucestershire SACRE as a teacher and developed a spreadsheet of trips and visitors as well as guidance and resources to support teachers across Bristol, Bath and South Gloucestershire. He led a successful RE hub for local teachers for two years through the LTLRE scheme and contributed to a number of conferences in the region. He retired from teaching at the end of 2018 due to ill health. He continues to have a great interest in RE / R&W and still supports the local SACRE. He believes in the right to freedom of religious belief and for people to be free not to hold a religious belief.

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## Images

- Image 1 <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/DNetbmwWsAAUjW?format=jpg&name=small>
- Image 2 <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/EJ5ddE9XsAMoYHh?format=jpg&name=small>
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- Image 4 <https://twitter.com/JChipperton/status/712700215535484928/photo/1>
- Image 5 [https://scontent-lhr8-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/57092778\\_10218326490849714\\_3771156151186489344\\_n.jpg?\\_nc\\_cat=110&ccb=2&\\_nc\\_sid=b9115d&\\_nc\\_ohc=ei5qmMrqHwAAX\\_L4p5m&\\_nc\\_ht=scontent-lhr8-1.xx&oh=81a171f38398b3b2ed906069ad8681ac&oe=5FC608D5](https://scontent-lhr8-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/57092778_10218326490849714_3771156151186489344_n.jpg?_nc_cat=110&ccb=2&_nc_sid=b9115d&_nc_ohc=ei5qmMrqHwAAX_L4p5m&_nc_ht=scontent-lhr8-1.xx&oh=81a171f38398b3b2ed906069ad8681ac&oe=5FC608D5)
- Image 6 [https://twitter.com/LMS\\_PRE/status/1202714515575640065/photo/1](https://twitter.com/LMS_PRE/status/1202714515575640065/photo/1)



