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A major new report from Ofsted, the schools inspection body, says that the Religious Education guidelines published in 2004 have failed to make the subject relevant to modern life and don't properly explore the issues. The report says that pupils should be given a more sophisticated understanding of religion's role in the world. Teaching should take a "warts and all" approach that acknowledges that religion can be a force for evil as well as good. "Pupils should be taught that religion is complex," says the report, "and should be given the opportunity to explore that ambiguity."

The report, *Making Sense of Religion*, found the teaching of Christianity was "often much less rigorous and more fragmented" than carefully sequenced units of work on other faiths. "Work on specific aspects of Christianity, such as the life of Jesus or the Bible, is isolated from an investigation of the religion itself." GCSE syllabuses paid little attention to issues related to religion's role and significance in contemporary Britain.

"Religion is much more in the media than it has been in recent years" says Ofsted's Director of Education, Miriam Rosen, "and this is, of course, because of events like the bombings in London in July 2005 and the New York incident back in 2001. This has raised people's awareness of religion and raised the importance of considering religion's role in society, and the impact of it."

The inspectors called on teachers not to shy away from controversy, but to accept in their classes that religion could be a force for bad as well as for good.

Ofsted says that although RE teaching has improved considerably, it is still a topic that tends to be learned "by rote". Gaining a GCSE in RE is relatively easy because, the report says, pupils are taught to pass the exam rather than taught the subject properly. This explains the huge number of pupils opting for GCSEs in RE – it is an unchallenging way to add to the final tally.

Under the current system, RE is a legal requirement but remains outside the National Curriculum and it is up to each of the 151 local authorities to decide individually on the contents of the local syllabus. In 2004 the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) published a national voluntary framework on RE, which has gone some way to standardising how the subject is taught, but these guidelines are now considered to have failed by Ofsted. To further complicate the issue, "faith schools" are allowed to create their own RE syllabuses.

When the guidelines were first published by the QCA, the NSS condemned them as "a charter for indoctrination". We said at the time that they did not explore all sides of religious influence in the world, bad and good, but were more like a tool for proselytisers in schools. Now it seems Ofsted has come to the same conclusion.

Keith Porteous Wood, the Executive Director of the National Secular Society, said: “The Ofsted recommendations are long overdue. RE has too long been a playground for proselytisers who want to use schools to evangelise and convince children that religion is always and everywhere a force for good. It is clear from what is happening in the world that this is not so, and Ofsted is right to insist that children be given the full picture. But while the whole area of RE is dominated by religious bodies – as it is at present – it will never be properly objective. We need to dismiss the SACREs and have a completely new and unbiased Religious Education syllabus that is part of the National Curriculum and properly caters for pupils that are non-religious (the majority). The churches should have minimal input and it should be created by independent academics without a religious agenda.”

Mr Wood said that he feared that if the QCA’s Religious Education framework, as it is presently formulated, were to be made a part of the National Curriculum it would achieve the complete opposite of what Ofsted was suggesting. “The Framework needs to be completely re-written to take the proselytising element out of it and to make it a genuinely academic subject instead of a platform for the church’s propaganda”.

There are already signs that the churches are getting ready to resist any reform of the way RE is structured. The Church of England said it would welcome a standard national curriculum, but indicated that it would want a big say about what was in it.

In Birmingham, the new Religious Education syllabus has been announced. It was drawn up by diocesan advisers, RE teachers, and experts from Liverpool Hope University and the Roman Catholic dioceses of Liverpool and Salford. The document says that two-thirds of the RE syllabus in Church of England secondary schools should focus on Christianity, including the Anglican tradition and other significant local Christian communities. It was launched by the chief education officer of the Church of England, the Revd Jan Ainsworth, at a conference at Archbishop Temple School in Preston last week.

Terry Sanderson, the president of the National Secular Society, asked: “With such heavy religious input, how can religious education in Birmingham ever be the neutral, even-handed subject that Ofsted wants? It’s the same story throughout the country.”

Oona Stannard, director of the Catholic Education Service, said: “If RE became a national curriculum subject we would certainly be looking for very particular negotiations with government because of the ability to deliver Catholic Religious Education in Catholic schools is at the heart of what we do and we would not cede that.”

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